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Some notes on the translation

I am not fluent in Japanese, so there **will** be translation mistakes as well as silly typos that I've overlooked. Please let me know if you find any.
Special terminology will be the same as the ones used in UTW's fansub of the anime. You can visit them at http://utw.me

From the New World

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I

Season of New Leaves

1

Late at night, after everything around me falls silent, I sink into a chair and close my eyes.

The scene that floats up from the depths of my mind is always the same, stamped permanently into my brain.

In the darkness at the back of the temple, a flame burns above the altar. Sparks burst from the fire like orange snowflakes, interrupting the sound of chanting coming from beneath the earth.

Each time, I wonder why it's this scene.

Since that night when I was twelve, twenty-three years have passed. In that time, various things have happened. Incidents more sorrowful and frightening than I could have ever imagined. They would rip out by the roots everything I had believed in until then.

And yet even now, why is that night always the first thing to come to my mind?

Is hypnotic suggestion really that powerful?

Sometimes, I still get the feeling that I haven't fully awakened from the brainwashing.

Now, my reasons for recording the stream of circumstances surrounding those events are as follows.

Many things were returned to dust, and since that day, ten years have passed.

A span of ten years doesn't mean much in the grand scheme of things. But problems piled up, and ironically, when the new order was instated, doubts about the future started sprouting. During this period, I spent some time studying history, and realized that as human beings, no matter how many tears we have to shed in order to learn a lesson, the moment the tears are dry, we forget. That's the type of beings we are.

Of course, nobody should forget the promise that the indescribable tragedy that happened that day will never occur again. I want to believe that.

But maybe someday, in a future where peoples' memories have faded away, will our foolishness cause us to travel down the same path again? I can't shake off this fear.

Because of this I suddenly resolved to write all this down, but time and again found myself bewildered. It was as if my memories had been moth-eaten here and there, making me unable to remember the reality of important details.

Although I checked with people who were there at the time, as we tend to make up details for the gaps in our memory, I was surprised to find that even our shared memories are contradictory.

For example, right before I met the False Minoshiro on Mt. Tsukuba, I had put on red-tinted sunglasses. I remember this fact as clear as day, but for some reason, Satoru is positive that I wasn't wearing glasses of any sort. And not just that, Satoru also hinted that finding the False Minoshiro was a feat he had done by himself. Of course, a notion as stupid as that is absolutely false.

I put down my pride, interviewed as many people as I could think of, and came across even more conflicting points. During that process, an undeniable reality occurred to me. That is, there didn't exist a single person whose memory wasn't distorted to hide his own faults.

As I was laughing at the pitiful foolishness of humans and writing down my new discovery, I suddenly realized that I don't have any basis on which to exclude myself from this rule. From someone else's perspective, there's no doubt that the memories from which I am writing this are warped to only show my good side.

Therefore, I would like to say that since this story is from my own perspective, it may suffer from distortion due to self-justification. Above all, the number of deaths that were the consequence of our actions may be motivation for such self-justification, however unconsciously it's done.

Having said that, I will try to unearth the truth from my memories as best as I can because I want to face the facts and realistically portray the events that happened. Also, I want to imitate the style of the old stories in hopes of recreating my thoughts and feelings at the time.

This draft is written in fade-proof ink on what claims to be anti-oxidizing paper that can last a millennium. When it's done, I won't show anyone (except maybe Satoru, and ask for his opinion), put it in a time capsule and bury it deep underground.

At that time I'll make two other copies for a total of only three left behind. If someday in the future the old order, or something like it, is restored and all publications are censored, the existence of this record should be kept secret for as long as possible. I think three is just enough for such a situation.

In other words, this record is a long letter left to my countrymen a thousand years from now. By the time it is read, it should have become evident whether we have been able to, in the true sense, change, and set foot along a new path.

I haven't introduced myself yet.

My name is Saki Watanabe. I was born in the district of Kamisu 66 on December 10th, 210.

Just before I was born, a type of bamboo that only flowers once every hundred years all simultaneously came into bloom. Snow fell in the middle of a summer everyone thought would not see a drop of rain for three months. Basically every kind of abnormal weather phenomenon possible occurred. And then on the night of December 10th, when everyone thought the earth was wrapped in darkness, a flash of lightning illuminated what many would later say was a golden-scaled dragon swimming through the rifts between the clouds.

…the reality is, none of that ever happened.

210 was a normal year, and like all the other children born that year in the district of Kamisu 66, I was a very normal child.

But to my mother, I wasn't. She was nearing the end of her thirties and was convinced that she would never bear children. In our time, having a child in your thirties is considered really late pregnancy.

Furthermore, my mother, Mizuho Watanabe, held the important office of librarian. Her decisions not only influenced the future of our town, but in certain cases could also result in the deaths of others. Having to endure that kind of pressure every day, in addition to being careful about her pregnancy isn't the kind of hardship people usually have to deal with.

During that period, my father, Takashi Sugiura, was the mayor of the town. That in itself was a busy job. But around the time I was born, the job of a librarian came with an incomparably greater responsibility than that of a mayor. Of course it's still like that now, but it was probably even more pronounced back then.

My mother was in the middle of a meeting about the classification of a newly discovered collection of books when she went into labor. This was over a week before the expected due date, but since her water broke without warning, she was immediately transported to the maternity hospital near the outskirts of town. The sound of my first cry was heard not ten minutes after. Unfortunately, my umbilical cord was wrapped around my neck. My face was purple and I was unable to cry properly. The birthing assistant, who was new at the job, nearly collapsed in panic at this. Luckily, the cord was easily cut and I finally breathed in the air of this world and let out a healthy cry.

Two weeks later, in the same maternity hospital, Maria Akizuki, who would later become my friend, was born. On top of being a premature breech birth, she was, like me, born with her umbilical cord around her neck. Though her condition was much more serious than mine; she was almost dead when she was delivered.

The birthing assistant, armed with the experience from my birth, apparently handled this very calmly. If there had been but a tiny slip and the cord was cut just a bit later, there's no doubt Maria would have died.

When I first heard this story, I was elated that I had somehow indirectly saved my friend's life. But now, every time I remember this, I'm hit with a wave of complicated thoughts. Because if she had never been born, there would never have been such a huge loss of human lives…

Let's return to the story. I spent my happy childhood surrounded by the lush nature of my hometown.

Kamisu 66 consists of seven towns spread out over a fifty-kilometer circumference. It's separated from the rest of the world by the Holy Barrier. A thousand years from now, the barrier may not exist anymore, so I'll briefly explain. It's a thick straw rope hung with zigzagging paper streamers that acts as a shield preventing impure things from entering the town.

Children are warned to never step outside the barrier. Evil spirits and monsters roamed outside and any child who ventures out alone would suffer terribly.

"But exactly what kinds of scary things are there?" I remember asking my father, albeit less fluently, one day when I was around six or seven years old.

"A lot of different kinds," he looked up from his documents. Resting his chin on his hand, he looked at me affectionately. Those warm brown eyes are burned into my memory to this day. Never

once has my father looked at me sternly and only once did he raise his voice. It was because I wasn't paying attention to where I was going and would have fallen into a gaping hole in the ground if he hadn't warned me.

"Saki, you already know, right? About queerats and copycats and blowdogs."

"But mom says those are just made up."

"The others may be, but queerats do exist," he said so nonchalantly that I was shocked.

"Lies."

"They're not lies. Queerats were recruited to help construct the town recently too."

"I've never seen them."

"We don't let children see them." Father didn't say why, but I imagined that it was because queerats are too hideous to be seen.

"But if they listen to humans, then they're not that scary, right?"

Father put down the documents he had been looking over and raised his right hand. As he chanted a spell in a low voice, a thin fiber of paper transformed, like invisible ink being revealed, into a complicated pattern woven into the paper. The seal of approval from the mayor.

"Saki, do you know what 'false obedience' means?"

I shook my head quietly.

"It means appearing to obey someone, but actually thinking the opposite underneath."

"What do you mean by 'the opposite'?"

"Deceiving the other person, and secretly planning to betray them."

My jaw dropped.

"People like that don't exist."

"You're right. People betraying other peoples' trust is impossible. But queerats aren't people."

For the first time, I felt the stirrings of fear.

"Queerats worship and obey us because we have cantus. But we don't know how they will behave toward children who've not yet awoken to their cantus. That's why we have to prevent queerats and children from meeting no matter what."

"But when you give them work to do, don't they have to come into town?"

"During those times there's always an adult supervising them." Father put the documents in a filing box and raised his hand again. The lid shimmered and melted into the box, forming a hollow lacquered block. Because no one else knows what he was visualizing as he used his cantus, it's hard for anyone other than father to reopen the box without breaking it.

"Anyway, don't ever go outside the Holy Barrier. Inside, the strength of the barrier makes it safe, but if you take one step out, you won't be protected by anyone's cantus."

"But the queerats…"

"It's not just the queerats. You've learned the stories about fiends and karma demons at school, right?"

My breath caught in my throat.

Fiend and karma demon stories are taught repeatedly during our early years of development. It becomes imprinted in our subconscious. Even though the versions we learn at school are made for children, they still gave us nightmares.

"Are there really fiends…and karma demons and stuff like that outside the Holy Barrier?"

"Uh huh," father smiled slightly to comfort me.

"Those are old legends, they don't exist now…"

"It's true they haven't been seen for the past hundred and fifty years, but it's better to be prepared for the unexpected. Saki, you wouldn't want to suddenly meet a fiend like the herb-gathering boy did, right?"

I nodded silently.

Here, I'll summarize the stories of the fiend and the karma demon. However, it isn't the fairy-tale children's version, but the full, adult version everyone learns when they enter Sage Academy.

Tale of the Fiend

This is a story from about a hundred fifty years ago. There was a boy gathering herbs on the mountain. Engrossed in this activity, he came to the Holy Barrier. He had picked just about all the herbs inside the barrier when he happened to look up, and saw that there were still plenty of herbs outside.

He had always been warned never to step outside the Holy Barrier. If for some reason he absolutely had to, he must have an adult with him.

But there were no adults around. The boy was tempted and thought stepping outside for just a little bit was okay. He poked his head out first. He just needed to duck under the barrier, pluck some herbs, and come right back. That'll be okay.

The boy slid quietly under the rope. The streamers swayed and rustled.

At that instant, he suddenly had an unpleasant feeling. In addition to the guilt at disobeying the adults, there was another feeling of unease he had never experienced before.

Reassuring himself that nothing was wrong, he approached the herbs.

Then he saw a fiend coming toward him.

Even though it was about the same height as the boy, it had a scary appearance. Its anger swirled like a fiery halo, burning everything around it. As the fiend approached, it mowed down everything in its path and made the foliage burst into flame.

The boy went pale, but he forced himself not to scream and stepped back. If he could just slip back under the rope, the fiend should vanish.

But a branch underfoot snapped.

The fiend turned its head, face completely devoid of emotion. It stared at the target of its anger.

The boy ducked under the rope and took off as fast as he could. Everything would be okay as long as he entered the protection of the barrier.

But when he looked back, the fiend had also ducked under the rope!

In that instant, the boy realized that he had done something irreparable. He had invited a fiend into the barrier.

The boy cried as he ran down the mountain path. The fiend chased him relentlessly.

The boy ran along the edge of the barrier, toward the stream in the opposite direction of the village.

When he glanced behind him, the fiend's face was hidden by the underbrush. Only its glowing eyes and leering mouth were visible.

The fiend was seeking a path to the village.

He couldn't let that happen. If the fiend followed him back, the entire village would probably be destroyed.

As he cleared the last of the underbrush, a sheer cliff appeared before him. The roaring of the river at the bottom reverberated up the walls. Across the gorge hung a new rope bridge.

The boy didn't cross the bridge. Instead, he headed upstream along the edge of the cliff.

When he looked back, the fiend had arrived at the bridge and was looking around for him.

The boy ran determinedly.

Shortly, another bridge appeared in the distance.

He neared the bridge silhouetted against the cloudy sky. Worn out by years of exposure to the elements, it swayed eerily as if beckoning to him.

The bridge could fall at any time. No one had used it in over ten years and he had always been warned not to.

Slowly, the boy started across the bridge.

The ropes made a disturbing creaking sound. The planks were made of oak, but looked ready to break at any moment.

When he was about halfway across, the bridge lurched suddenly. Looking back, he saw that the fiend had also stepped onto the bridge.

The bridge swayed more and more wildly as the fiend came nearer.

The boy glanced down at the bottom of the valley. It was dizzyingly far.

He looked up. The fiend was already closing in on him.

When he could clearly see the fiend's unpleasant face, the boy brandished the sickle he had been carrying, and in one movement, cut through the ropes holding the bridge.

The bridge swung down and the boy almost slipped off but somehow managed to grab onto the rope.

Did the fiend fall to the bottom? The boy looked. Somehow, the fiend was also clinging to the rope. It slowly turned its murderous gaze toward him.

The sickle had fallen into the valley. He couldn't cut the ropes anymore.

What should he do? He prayed to the heavens. It doesn't matter if I die; please don't let the fiend get into the village.

Did the boy's wish reach the heavens? Or was it that the ropes could no longer bear their weight?

The rope snapped, sending them down into the valley. The boy and the fiend disappeared from view.

Fiends have never appeared since then.

There are a couple of lessons in this story.

Kids can easily understand that it's teaching you to stay within the Holy Barrier. For slightly older kids, it's probably trying to tell us that we should be more concerned about our town than ourselves, and be prepared to sacrifice our lives for it.

But the smarter you are, the harder it is to understand the real lesson.

Who would have thought that the real aim of the story is to let us know that fiends really do exist?

Tale of the Karma Demon

This story is from about eighty years ago. There lived a boy in the village. He was an incredibly bright child, but had one flaw. As he grew older, this flaw became more and more obvious.

He was extremely proud of his intelligence and looked at everything else with disdain.

He pretended to accept the teachings in school and from other adults, but the important lessons never really reached his heart.

He began to sneer at the foolishness of adults and laugh at the laws of the world.

Arrogance sows the seeds of karma.

The boy gradually drifted away from his circle of friends. Loneliness became is only companion and confidant.

Loneliness is the seedbed of karma.

In his solitude, the boy spent a lot of time thinking. He thought about forbidden things and questioned things better left alone.

Unclean thoughts cause karma to grow unchecked.

The boy unknowingly built up more and more karma, and transformed into something inhuman — a karma demon.

Before anyone knew, the village was empty; everyone had fled in fear of the karma demon. It went to live in the forest, but all the animals there disappeared too.

As the karma demon walked, the plants around it twisted in all sorts of unimaginable positions and rotted.

All the food it touched instantly turned into lethal poison.

The karma demon wandered aimlessly through the dead, deformed forest.

Eventually, it came to realize that it shouldn't be living in this world.

The karma demon left the darkness of the forest. Before his eyes, he saw it, wreathed in a glittering radiance. He had arrived at a deep lake nestled in the mountains.

It walked into the lake, thinking that water as pure as this would surely cleanse him of his karma.

But the water surrounding it instantly became dark and murky, and started turning poisonous.

Karma demons should not exist in this world.

It understood that, and quietly disappeared into the bottom of the lake.

The lesson here is probably more straightforward than in the fiend story.

But of course, that doesn't mean we understood the real meaning behind it. At least, not until that day, where in our endless despair and sadness, we saw a true karma demon before our very eyes…

Sorry, sometimes as I'm writing, a flood of memories threatens to suffocate me and I can't control it. Let's go back to my childhood.

Like I wrote before, Kamisu 66 is made up of seven towns. In the center is where the town's administration is gathered. On the eastern bank of the Tone River is the town of Hayring. To the north, in the middle of a forest dotted with big houses, is Pinewind. East of that, the forest opened up to the coastlands, where Whitesand is. Adjacent to Hayring in the south is the town of Waterwheel. On the other bank of the river toward the northwest is the town Outlook, whose name comes from its location. Lined up with the rice paddies in south is Gold, and Oakgrove is the westmost.

My hometown is Waterwheel. This name probably needs a bit of explanation. Dozens of canals leading off of the Tone River wind through Kamisu 66 and people come and go by boats. Despite that, the constant movement of the water meant it was clean enough to bathe in, though you might think twice about drinking it. In front of my house, in addition to a lot of brightly colored red and white koi swimming around, there were also a lot of water wheels, which is where the name comes from. Every town has water wheels, but our town has quite a number of them, and they made for a magnificent sight. Overshot, backshot, undershot, breastshot… Those are all the ones I can remember. There might have been more. A lot of them were used to relieve us of mundane tasks like hulling rice and milling wheat.

Among them was a kind of water wheel only some towns had, with metal blades used to generate electricity. The valuable energy is used to power the loudspeakers on the roof of the public hall. Uses of electricity outside of this were strictly prohibited by the Code of Ethics.

Every day just before sunset, the loudspeakers would play the same melody. It's called "Going Home" and came from a part of a symphony written a long, long time ago by a composer with the strange name of Dvorak. The lyrics we learned in school go something like this.

The sun sets over the distant mountains
Stars stud the sky
Today's work is finished
My heart feels light
In the cool evening breeze
Come, gather around
Gather around

The bonfire burning brightly in the darkness
Now dies down
Sleep comes easily
Inviting me to disappear
Gently watching over us
Come, let us dream
Let us dream

When the song plays, all the children playing in the fields had to return home. That's why whenever I think of the song, sunset sceneries reflexively appear in my mind. The town during twilight. Long shadows on the sandy soil of the pine forest. Dozens of grey skies reflected in mirrored surface of the paddy fields. Groups of red dragonflies. But the most vivid memories are of watching the sunset from the top of the hill.

When I close my eyes, one scene comes to mind. It was some time between the end of summer and the beginning of autumn, when the weather had just started getting cooler.

"We have to go home now," someone said.

When I listened carefully, I could hear the faint melody carried over by the wind.

"Then let's call it a tie then," Satoru said, and the children came out of hiding in groups of twos and threes.

Everyone, ranging from ages eight to eleven, had spent the entire day engaged in a large-scale game of capture the flag. It's a game like a prolonged midwinter snowball fight, where you have two teams who must invade the other's territory and in the end whoever manages to steal the other team's flag wins. That day, our team had made a grave mistake in our opening move and seemed really likely to lose.

"That's not fair. We were just about to win too," Maria pouted. She was more fair-skinned than everyone else, and had big, light-colored eyes. More than anything else, her flaming red hair made her very conspicuous.

"Hurry up and surrender already."

"Yeah, because we're way better," Ryou chimed in after Maria. Even at this age, Maria had the makings of a queen.

"Why should we surrender?" I replied indignantly.

"'Cause we're better," Ryou repeated the same old argument.

"But you haven't even taken our flag yet," I looked at Satoru.

"It's a tie," he declared.

"Satoru, you're on this team, aren't you? Why are you taking their side?" Maria snapped.

"I can't help it, the rule says that curfew is at sundown."

"But the sun hasn't set yet."

"Don't split hairs, that's just because we're at the top of the hill, right?" I said, biting back my irritation. Even though we're usually good friends, at times like these, Maria annoys me.

"Hey, we really have to go," Reiko said worriedly.

"When we hear 'Going Home', we're supposed to return right away."

"If they surrender, then we can go home," Ryou parroted Maria.

"Stop it already. Hey, ref!" Satoru shouted exasperatedly at Shun. Shun stood apart from us at the top of the hill gazing at the scenery. His bulldog Subaru sat quietly next to him.

"What?" he replied after a beat.

"Don't 'what' me. Tell them it's a tie."

"Yeah, it's a draw," Shun said, turning back to the view.

"We're going home then," Reiko said and a group of them headed down the hill together because they shared boats to get to their respective towns.

"Wait, we're not done yet."

"I'm going, or else the copycats will get us."

Maria and them looked unsatisfied, but the game had gradually ended.

"Saki, we should go back too," Satoru said as I walked toward Shun.

"Aren't you leaving?"

"Yeah," Shun didn't look away from the mesmerizing scenery.

"Hey, let's go already," Satoru said impatiently.

Shun pointed silently.

"Over there, you see it?"

"What?"

He was pointing in the direction of Gold, near the border between the paddy fields and the forest.

"There, a minoshiro."

Ever since we were young, we were taught that our eyes were more important than anything else, so we were all blessed with good vision. This time too, from hundreds of meters away, on a footpath between the fields where twilight and shadows crossed, I could discern the white shape of something moving slowly along.

"You're right."

"What about it? It's not like they're rare or anything." Satoru's usually calm voice was tinged with displeasure for some reason.

But I didn't move. Didn't want to move.

The minoshiro moved at a snail's pace across the footpath, through the meadow and disappeared into the forest. As I traced its path, my attention turned to Shun.

I didn't know yet the name of the emotion I felt. As I stood next to him looking at the town dyed in the light of the setting sun, my chest was filled with a sweet yet painful feeling.

Maybe this too was a fabricated scene. A dramatization made with a mix of similar episodes, sprinkled with that spice we call sentiment…

Be that as it may, these scenes still hold a special meaning for me to this day. The final memory of a life in a flawless world. A time when everything was in its place and there were no doubts about the future.

Even now, when I think of my first love, it still gives off a warm glow like the setting sun. Although that, and everything else, would soon be swallowed by a bottomless void of sadness and emptiness.

2

I'm going to talk a little bit more about my childhood.

In Kamisu 66, children are required to start going to school at age six. The one I went to was called Harmony School. There are two other similar schools called Friendship and Morality.

At that time, the population was a little bit over three thousand. I only found out after researching about education in the ancient past that having three schools for such a small population is apparently quite remarkable. But this only served to show that the true nature of the society I was born in was a lot more than meets the eye. As for other statistics during the same period, over half of the adults in the community were, for whatever reason, pursuing education related professions.

This is inconceivable for a monetary economy. But for a community based on mutual cooperation, money is not necessary. The spread of human resources naturally directs itself toward areas that are needed the most, and those people complete tasks as required.

Harmony School was about a twenty-minute walk from my house. It's even faster by boat, but the oars are too big and heavy for children to row, so walking is preferable.

The school is in a quiet location a little ways away from the town center on the southern edge of Hayring. It's a one-story structure made of dark, polished wood in the shape of an A lying down. The front entrance is the crossbar of the A. When you go in, the first thing you see is the phrase "Cherish Harmony" framed on the wall. It's the first article in the Seventeen-article Constitution written by a sage from the ancient times called Prince Shotoku. It means to build everything on harmony. That's where the name of our school comes from. I don't know what sayings are hanging on the walls in Friendship and Morality.

Along the side of the entrance were faculty rooms and classrooms. More classrooms are lined up on the right arm of the A. Although the number of people at school, faculty included, was no more than a hundred fifty, we had over twenty classrooms. The administration wing was on the left and students were not allowed to enter.

In the yard in front of the building were a sports field, jungle gyms and other playground equipment, and an enclosure for animals we raised such as chickens, ducks, rabbits, hamsters and more. The students take turns caring for the animals. In the corner of the yard stood a white,

wooden instrument box. No one knows what it's for; in the six years we were at the school, it was never once used.

The courtyard surrounded by the three school buildings was a huge mystery. Students were strictly forbidden from entering and we never had any excuse to.

Apart from in the administration wing, there were no windows that looked out onto the courtyard. So the only time we had a chance to peek inside was if we happened to be in there when the door was opened.

"…so what do you think is in the courtyard?" Satoru asked us with an eerie grin. We all held our breaths.

"Wait, you don't know what's in there either, right?" I couldn't stand him dragging out the tension like that.

"Well, not personally, but there's someone who did," Satoru said, looking annoyed at being interrupted.

"Who?"

"Someone you don't know."

"Not a student?"

"He graduated already."

"What's up with that?" I made my disbelief obvious.

"That doesn't matter, just tell us what he saw already," Maria said. Everyone made sounds of agreement.

"Okay. Well, people who don't believe it don't have to listen…" Satoru glanced at me slyly. I pretended not to notice. It would have been better to walk away, but I actually wanted to hear what he had to say.

"When students are present, teachers never open the door that leads to he courtyard, right? You know, the one in front of the administration building that's made of evergreen wood. But that time, they accidentally forgot to check if there were people around and opened the door."

"You already told us this," Ken pressed.

"In there were…an incredible number of graves!" He was obviously exaggerating, but everyone else seemed awestruck.

"Wow…"

"Liar."

"That's freaky," Maria covered her ears with her hands. I told her she was being ridiculous.

"So, whose graves are those?"

"Huh?" Satoru had been enjoying the effect his scary story had on the others and was caught unprepared.

"Since there are so many of them, whose are they?"

"I dunno. Anyway, there were a ginormous number of them."

"Why would they deliberately put graves in the school courtyard?"

"Like I said, I only know that much."

It seemed like Satoru was taking the easy way out by insisting that since he only heard this from someone else, he didn't have the answer to everything.

"…maybe they're students' graves?" Ken said, and everyone fell silent.

"Students? From when? Why did so many die?" Maria asked in a low voice.

"I'm not sure, but I've heard that some people don't graduate from here and just disappear…"

The students in the three schools in our town all entered school at the same time, but for reasons I'll explain later, graduated at different times. But this time it felt like Ken's words had somehow touched on a subject that was deeply taboo and no one knew what to say to that.

At that moment, Shun, who had been sitting apart from us reading a book, looked over. In the light coming in from the windows, I realized that he had really long eyelashes.

"There aren't any graves."

Everyone was relieved by his words, but then a huge question occurred to us.

"What do you mean there aren't any? How do you know?" I asked for all of us.

Shun answered nonchalantly, "There weren't any when I saw it."

"Huh?"

"Shun, you've seen it?"

"Really?"

"You're kidding, right?"

We showered him with questions. Satoru looked disappointed at having his thunder stolen.

"I guess I never mentioned this before. Last year, there was one time when the homework wasn't collected. An assignment on a personal observation for science class. The teacher told me to bring them when they were all turned in, so I went over to the administration wing."

We all waited with bated breath for him to continue, but Shun took his time marking the book he was reading with a bookmark.

"One of the rooms filled with books has windows that looks into the courtyard. There were some strange things out there, but no graves."

It seemed like he wanted the conversation to end there. I still had about a thousand questions I wanted to ask, so I took a deep breath.

"Don't be ridiculous," Satoru said in an unsteady voice I'd never heard before. "What 'strange things'? Explain properly."

You didn't want to explain anything yourself, I thought, but I wanted to hear Shun's answer, so I didn't interrupt.

"Um, how should I say this? Lined up at the far end of the courtyard were about five of what looked like brick storage rooms, with big wooden doors in front of them."

Although his answer didn't explain anything, it had a strange truth to it. Satoru, unable to think of further questions, tsk-ed.

"So, Satoru, that one guy who graduated, what did he see again?" I pressed. He seemed to realize that the situation had turned on him and hesitated to answer.

"Like I said, I only heard it from someone else, so I don't really know. Maybe he mistook what he saw, or maybe at that time there were actually graves," he dug himself deeper into the hole.

"Then why are the graves gone?"

"I have no idea…but did you know? That guy saw something even scarier than the graves," Satoru found a chance to change the subject.

"What did he see?" As I expected, Maria took the bait.

"You can't ask right away. Satoru hasn't thought of something scary yet, so give him some time," I teased, but Satoru was serious.

"I'm not lying. That guy really did see something. It wasn't exactly in the courtyard, but…"

"Yeah, yeah."

"So what did he see?" Ken couldn't resist any longer.

I thought Satoru would be smiling conspiratorially at sharing the secret, but instead his face became expressionless.

"An unbelievably huge shadow of a cat."

It went completely silent.

At this time, I admired Satoru for his oratory skills. If there were ever a job for making scary stories, he would be the first to be picked for it. Though of course, I can't think of any society that would have such a dumb job.

"Is that, a copycat…?" When Maria asked the question everyone was thinking, we all started talking at once.

"It seems like copycats show up at the elementary school a lot."

"But I wonder why?"

"Isn't it obvious? They target children!"

"They often come out at night during autumn."

"They sometimes show up at your house, but usually only around midnight…."

We were simultaneously afraid of and attracted to the dark. We were obsessed with scary stories about evil spirits in the mountains and rivers, but out of all of them, copycats were the ones that made us shiver with fright. Although the stories circulated among children were all embellished, most agree that copycats are about as large as an adult. Although it has the face of a cat, its limbs are abnormally long, and they slink behind children like a shadow. When they reach a deserted area, it'll reach out from behind and pin the child down. When they do that, the child will go numb as if hypnotized, then the copycat opens its mouth a hundred eighty degrees and chomps down on the child's neck so he can't pull away. In that way, not a drop of blood will be spilled, so the child's body will never be found, and so on.

"And then? Where did he see the copycat?"

"I don't know whether it was a copycat or not. All he saw was a shadow," Satoru said confidently, his previous embarrassment forgotten. "But the place where he saw it was really close to the courtyard."

"Where though? There's no way to enter or exit the courtyard from outside."

"It wasn't from the outside."

"Huh?" I doubted what Satoru was saying, but then why did I feel a shiver run up my spine?

"It was at the end of the hall in the administration wing and disappeared right in front of the door to the courtyard…"

No one could say anything to this. Although I don't want to admit it, Satoru got the reaction he wanted. Anyway, they were nothing more than made up stories told among children. At that time, I still believed that.

Looking back on it, my days at Harmony school were pretty happy. Even though it was just going to school and meeting our friends, we couldn't help but have fun every day.

Starting in the morning, we had math, language, social studies, science and other boring classes, but the teachers kept an eye on all of us to make sure we all understood the material, and patiently explained to those who needed help, so there was never anyone left behind. At the same time, we also had a lot of tests — one every three days, if I remember correctly. But most of them weren't related to what we were learning. It was short essays like "I'm sad, because…", so they weren't really stressful.

Rather, what were more difficult were self-expression assignments. Although drawing and clay sculpting was fun, writing daily essays was annoying. But it's probably thanks to all the practice I got then that I can write this story without much trouble.

After the boring classes, we spent all afternoon playing. And since we had two days off for the weekends, we spent a lot of time running around outside to our heart's content.

When I first entered Harmony school, I had already explored all along the lazily winding canals, gazing at the thatched roofs of the houses, going as far as Gold. During autumn, the entire town is covered in golden ears of rice, which is where it gets is name from. But the town is actually more interesting during spring and summer. When you peered into the paddy fields, you could see pond skaters darting on the surface of the water, and loaches and mosquitofish swimming underneath. At the bottom, tadpole shrimp crept about, stirring up mud to conceal themselves among the weeds. In the canals and reservoirs providing water to the farms were giant waterbugs, water scorpions, watersticks, diving beetles, and other insects, as well as crucian carps and various fish. The older kids showed us how to use cotton thread and dried squid to bait crayfish, and after a day, we had caught a bucket full of them.

There were also a lot of birds in Gold. In the spring, the cries of skylarks wheeling through the sky echoed all around, and in the summer, before rice was planted, dozens of ibises frequented the fields to hunt loaches. Ibises mated in the winter and built nests in the nearby trees. The young ibises left the nest the following autumn, and although the sound of their cries wouldn't be considered beautiful, the sight of a flock of light pink ibises in flight was quite majestic. Other birds that we often saw flying around were black kites, brown eared bulbuls, great tits, Oriental turtle doves, puffer sparrows, triwing crows and more.

And although it's not a bird, we could also occasionally spot minoshiro. It seems like they sometimes get lost while searching for plants for small animals and wander out of the forest onto the paths near the paddy fields. Minoshiro not only improve the soil but also eat harmful insects, so they are respected and regarded as good omens by farming communities. Normally they're about a meter tall, but giant ones are over two meters tall, with numerous, waving feelers. From the elegant way they move, there's no doubt as to why they're considered divine creatures.

Other revered animals are albino rat snakes and melanistic striped snakes, both of which are hunted by minoshiro. How the folk beliefs at the time compromised between their stories and this reality is a mystery.

When students enter the upper grades, they go on expeditions to see the westmost town of Oakgrove, the sand dunes of Hasaki Beach south of Whitesand, and the upper reaches of the Tone

River where flowers blossomed all year round. Along the waterfront were spoon-billed sand pipers and herons, and red-crowned cranes flew by once in a while. It was fun looking for great reed warbler nests among the reeds along the sides of the river, and for haythatcher nests on top of the mountains in open fields of silver grass. In particular, the fake eggs laid by haythatchers were perfect for pranking people with.

But no matter how many animals we saw, since we're inside the Holy Barrier, it's not really nature; it's more like being in a miniature garden. Basically, in the past, the animals we had in a zoo were probably the same as the ones outside of it. The elephants, lions, giraffes and other animals we see now are in reality mutations created by our cantus — false elephants, imitation lions, faux giraffes — so that in the event that one of them manage to escape from their enclosures, there is no possibility of visitors being harmed.

The environment inside the barrier is completely altered to be safe for humans. That fact became much more obvious later, but before that, I never wondered why we could run around in the wilderness all we wanted without being bitten by venomous snakes or stung by insects. Inside the barrier, there were no venomous snakes like pit vipers or ringed grass snakes. The only snakes we had were harmless, like Japanese rat snakes, Oriental odd-tooth snakes, Japanese forest rat snakes, Asian keelbacks and rosary snakes.

In addition to that, the various cypresses growing in the forest secreted, to an almost excessive degree, a foul-smelling substance that killed mold spores, ticks, chiggers, germs and other things harmful to us.

When talking about childhood, I also have to mention the annual celebrations and rituals we had. Passed on from one generation to the next, these seasonal events created a sort of rhythm in our lives.

Just off the top of my head, in the spring we have a ritual for driving away evil spirits, a festival to pray for a successful harvest, and a festival for keeping away infectious diseases. In the summer, there's the Summer Festival (Monster Festival), the Fire Festival, and the Feast of Lanterns. In the fall there's a festival on the first of august, and a ceremony of offering newly harvested rice to the gods. And the events that remind me of winter are the Snow Festival, the New-Year Festival and another festival at the end of the New-Year Festival.

But the one that is carved deepest in my mind is the ritual used for driving away evil spirits.

It supposedly can also be called the Demon-Chasing Festival but whether that's true or not is uncertain. It's one of our oldest festivals, with over two thousand years of history.

On the morning of the festival, we children gathered in an open square. We wore 'purity masks' made of damp clay covered with powdered chalk and played the part of 'shinshi' in the ritual.

Ever since I was a child, I was scared of this ceremony because two of the masks used were exceptionally horrifying.

The two were masks representing fiends and karma demons. The fiend's face had a sinister grin plastered on it. Afterwards, when the ban on information about ceremonies was lifted, I tried to find out its history, but the information was unclear. What I found was that it closely resembles the snake mask from ancient Noh plays. It's the final of the three stages of a human becoming a demon that goes from bestialization → hannya → snake.

On the other hand, the karma demon's face is one of fear and anguish, though its features are muddled and crooked and sometimes don't even look human.

The ritual that makes up the core of the festival goes something like this. White sand is spread out over the square with lit braziers on the eastern and western end, while twenty or thirty shinshi march around the flames chanting, "Demons, be gone. Demons, be gone" in a peculiar rhythm.

Then the exorcist appears dressed in a traditional costume and carrying a big spear in his hands. But the first thing everyone always notices is his golden, four-eyed mask.

The exorcist joins the shinshi in chanting and circling the fires and scatters beans in all directions to ward off calamities and bad luck. He also threw them at the spectators and people would cup their hands to catch them.

From here, the horrifying part starts. The exorcist turns toward the shinshi without warning and throws the rest of his beans at them.

"Impurity is within us!" he shouts and the shinshi repeat after him. At this signal, two of the shinshi tear off their purity masks, revealing themselves to be a fiend and a karma demon.

As a shinshi, this scene was scary enough to take my breath away. Once, the shinshi right next to me suddenly transformed into a fiend and the rest of the shinshi scattered like roaches in terror, convinced that they were seeing the actual demons.

"Expel impurity!" the exorcist shouts as he drives away the two demons with the spear. The demons put on a show of resisting, but when everyone joins in shouting, they run off, and the ritual is over.

I still remember the sight of Satoru's face when he took off the mask, shivering.

"You're pale as a ghost," I said, and Satoru's colorless lips trembled.

"So what? You are too."

What we saw in each other's eyes was our own hidden fears.

Satoru's eyes opened wide and jerked his chin toward something behind my back. I turned around and saw the exorcist coming back to the square, unfastening his mask.

The exorcist is generally accepted to have the most powerful cantus of us all. And as far as I know, Shisei Kaburagi has never once let anyone else take that claim from him.

Shisei Kaburagi felt us staring at him and smiled slightly. What was strange was that even after taking off the exorcist's mask, he was still wearing another one on the top half of his face. It's rumored that no one has ever seen his true face. His nose and mouth looked plain, but the dark glasses hiding his eyes gave him an ominous, intimidating air.

"Was it scary?" he asked in a low, resonant voice. Satoru nodded with an awestruck look on his face. Shisei Kaburagi's gaze lingered on me for what felt like an abnormally long time.

"You're interested in a lot of things, aren't you?"

I stiffened, unsure of how to respond.

"Will you have good luck, or bad luck?" Shisei Kaburagi left with the shadow of a smile on his face.

For a while we stood there as if entranced. Then Satoru sighed and murmured, "That guy probably has the power to split the earth in half if he really concentrated…"

Although I didn't believe in Satoru's nonsense, what he said remained in my mind for a long time.

Happy times never stay that way for long.

My childhood was no exception, but the ironic thing is that back then I worried that those happy times were too long.

Like I said before, everyone graduates from Harmony School at a different time. The first to graduate from our class was Shun. A boy with better grades than anyone else, and with an adult's wisdom and maturity, he suddenly disappeared from our class one day. Our homeroom teacher, Sanada, proudly announced his graduation to the rest of the class.

After that, my one wish was to hurry up and graduate so I could be in the same school as Shun. However, even though my schoolmates began leaving one by one, it was never my turn. When Maria graduated, I was left behind again. No matter how much I tried to explain, other people couldn't understand how I felt then.

When the cherry blossoms started wilting, there were only five out of the original twenty-five students left in the class. Satoru and I were among them. Even the usually boisterous Satoru looked depressed. Every morning, after we made sure that no one else had graduated, we would sigh with relief and continue with our day. If possible, we wanted to graduate at the same time, but if not, we each secretly wished to be the first.

But my meager wish was completely destroyed. As we entered May, Satoru, who was my last hope, finally graduated. Two others followed almost immediately, leaving only two of us. Though it may seem weird, I can't remember that other person's name no matter how I try. Although he may have been the slowest in the class and a completely unremarkable student, I don't think that's why I can't remember. I think I may have unconsciously repressed my memories of him.

During that time, I holed myself up in my room every day after school and didn't talk to anyone. Even my parents became worried about my behavior.

"There's no need to be impatient, Saki," mother said one evening, stroking my hair. "It doesn't matter if you graduate early. I know it's lonely because everyone is gone, but you'll meet up with them again soon."

"I'm not really…lonely or anything," I said, throwing myself facedown onto my bed.

"You know, graduating early isn't that special. It doesn't have anything to do with the strength or quality of your cantus. Have I ever told you? That your dad and I didn't graduate particularly early either."

"But you weren't last in the class either, right?"

"No, but…"

"I don't want to be dropped out."

"Don't say something like that!" she said in an unusually stern voice. "Where did you hear that from?"

I buried my face in my pillow and remained silent.

"The gods decide when you get to graduate, so all you have to do is wait. You'll be able to catch up to everyone else in no time."

"What if…"

"Hmm?"

"What if I can't graduate?"

For a split second, mother was speechless, but then she smiled brightly and said, "Were you worried about that, silly? It'll be fine. You'll definitely graduate, it's just a matter of time."

"But there are people who can't, right?"

"Yes, but that's less than a one in a million chance."

I sat up and our eyes met. For some reason, my mother seemed a little shaken.

"Is it true that if you can't graduate, a copycat will come after you?"

"Don't be silly, copycats don't exist in the world. You'll be an adult soon; if you keep talking about stuff like that, people will laugh at you."

"But, I saw one."

In that instant, an unmistakable shadow of fear flitted across her face.

"What are you talking about? You must have imagined it."

"I saw it," I repeated, trying to elicit the reaction again so I could confirm what it was. I wasn't lying. I really felt that I had seen one. But it had happened so quickly that even I thought I must have imagined it. "It was before I came home yesterday, around sundown. I was at an intersection and saw something that looked like a copycat crossing it. It disappeared instantly though."

Mother sighed.

"Do you know the saying 'seeing ghosts in silver grass?' If you keep thinking about scary things, everything you see will be scary. What you saw was just a cat, or a weasel. It's hard to see things clearly when it's getting dark." Mother was acting like usual again. When she said goodnight and turned off the light, I fell asleep easily.

But when I opened my eyes again in the middle of the night, all feelings of peace and safety had disappeared.

My heart was beating like a drum, my hands and feet were icy and my entire body was drenched in sweat. Really nasty sweat.

Something sinister was scrabbling at the wainscoting between the ceiling and the roof. It was barely audible, but sounded like the panels were being scratched at with sharp claws.

Has a copycat come to get me?

I couldn't move as if frozen by a curse.

Struggling to regain control, I slowly freed myself from the spell. I slipped out of bed and slid the door open silently. Moonlight spilled into the corridor from the windows. Although it was already spring, the floorboards beneath my bare feet were cold.

Just a little bit more, almost there. My parents' bedroom was just around the corner. I breathed a sigh of relief as I saw light leaking out from under the door. As I reached out to open the door, I heard them talking. My mother's voice, filled with a concern I had never heard before. My hand stopped in midair.

"I'm worried. At this rate, she might…"

"If you keep worrying, I'll only be a bad influence on Saki," father said in a dejected voice.

"But if this continues…has the Board of Education started moving yet?"

"I don't know."

"It's hard to exert any influence on them from the library. But you have sanctioning privileges, so can't you do something about it?"

"The board is independent. I don't have the power to investigate them, much less from the position of Saki's father."

"I don't want to lose another child!"

"You're being too loud."

"But she said she saw a tainted cat!"

"She probably just imagined it."

"What if it's real? What do we do?"

I took a step back. Although the contents of their conversation were beyond me, I understood clearly that I had overheard something I was never supposed to hear.

As quietly as I had come, I went back to my room. There was a pale blue emperor moth the size of my hand sitting on the window. It seemed like a messenger of ill omens sent from the underworld. Although I wasn't cold, my body wouldn't stop trembling.

What's happening?

For the first time in my life I felt vulnerable and alone, with no one to turn to.

What in the world is happening to me?

An unpleasant creaking sound was coming from the ceiling.

Something was approaching…

I sensed something as huge as fear itself, coming closer and closer.

Ah, it's almost here.

The moth took off and vanished into the darkness

The next instant, the window frame started shaking and rattling, even though there was no wind. The shaking got stronger and stronger, like someone outside was trying to tear the window out of the frame.

The door slid open on its own and slammed closed again with a bang.

I gasped. It was hard to breathe. I tried to draw air deep into my lungs. But I couldn't. It's coming. Coming. Coming…

Suddenly, everything in the room started banging around violently. The chair and table started bucking like a wild horse, pens and pencils flew across the room and pierced through the door. The bed slowly floated toward the ceiling.

I screamed.

Sounds of hurried footsteps came down the hall. My parents were shouting my name. The door sprang open and they tumbled into the room.

"Saki, it's okay now!" my mother wrapped me in a tight hug.

"What in the world is this?" I shouted.

"It's okay, don't worry. It's a Spirit of Blessing! It finally came to you."

"This?"

The invisible monster wrecking my room had slowly calmed down after my parents arrived.

"This means you're an adult now, Saki," father said, relief showing in his smile.

"So, I…?"

"You graduate from Harmony School today. Tomorrow, you enter Sage Academy."

The book that had been floating lazily in midair dropped lifelessly to the ground. My bed tilted and landed with a thud as if the thread holding it up had been cut.

Mother hugged me so tightly it hurt. "Thank goodness! There's nothing to worry about anymore!"

As warm tears fell on the back of my neck, an overwhelming sense of relief washed over me and I closed my eyes.

But my mother's pained cry of "I don't want to lose another child!" echoed in the back of my mind.

3

I just recently learned about a phenomenon called poltergeists that was recorded in ancient literature.

In my hands, I'm holding some books salvaged by the library my mother works at. Stamped on the cover was the word "bewitching". Those of us in Harmony School and Sage Academy are allowed to read class one books stamped "recommended", "excellent", and "good". But class four books like this one are unavailable to most civilians. By a twist of fate, it had escaped biblioclasm by being buried deep in an underground storage room.

According to this book, during a time in the past when not everyone had cantus, there were often reports about ghosts knocking on the walls, silverware dancing in the air, furniture moving by itself, creaking sounds in an empty house, and other strange phenomena.

But in most reports, there always seemed to be adolescent children in the household. One analysis of this is that most children are going through a lot of emotional struggles during that time, and their sexual energy is unconsciously manifested as psychokinesis.

In other words, poltergeists are actually events of recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis (RSPK), and it goes without saying that the Spirit of Blessing that visited me was not a spirit, but an instance of RSPK.

A lot of things happened in the three days that followed the events of that night. Representatives from the Board of Education came to our house shortly after my parents notified them that I had acquired my cantus. There was an elderly woman in white robes, a young woman who looked like a teacher, and a middle aged man in what looked like a monk's work robes. The old woman in the middle wasted no time in questioning me about my health and emotional condition in minute detail. I thought that I would be admitted to Sage Academy after that, but this was just the beginning.

I was taken away from my home for a while. The older lady said that this was part of the procedure to enter Sage Academy and not to worry. My parents sent me off with a hug and a smile, and didn't voice any misgivings they might have had.

I boarded a windowless houseboat and was given a bowl of something they said was anti-seasickness medicine. It was sweet, like brown sugar, but the aftertaste was incredibly bitter. My mind went blank right after drinking it.

I could feel the boat traveling at a good speed, but had no idea which direction it was headed in. From the way the waves hit the boat and the sound of the wind, I guessed that the path we were traveling was not very wide. Maybe we were on the main current of the Tone River. I wanted to ask, but thought it was probably better not to talk more than I needed to, so I didn't. The younger woman accompanying me questioned me incessantly the entire time. There wasn't a theme to what she was asking, and it didn't seem like she was writing down my answers.

Three hours later, after many twists and turns, the boat stopped. The harbor and the surrounding area were well covered, giving no view of the outside.

And just as I expected, as we walked up the stairs into a temple-like building, no part of the outside world was visible.

A young monk in black robes and a recently shaved head came out to greet us. The trio from the committee appeared too. I was led to an empty, traditional-style room. On the wall was a scroll with freshly written calligraphy. I couldn't read what it said, but it looked similar to the one hanging in Harmony School.

I knelt down on the tatami, but at the monk's directions, switched to sitting in the lotus position, with the tops of my feet on my thighs. He seemed want me to meditate and collect myself. Since we had to meditate every day at Harmony School, I was used to this, but secretly wished I had worn a more comfortable pair of pants.

I breathed deeply into my stomach and tried to settle my mind as quickly as possible. But I needn't have hurried, because I ended up waiting for two or three hours anyway. During that time, I realized that the sun had set. Time seemed to pass at a different speed that it usually did. I was only half-heartedly trying to calm my mind. For some reason, I couldn't focus on just one thing.

As the room darkened, I started feeling a little bit uneasy. At first I couldn't figure out why, then I realized that even though it was near sunset, I couldn't hear "Going Home". No matter where you are in Kamisu 66, you can always hear that melody. If I was far enough that I couldn't hear it, then it meant that I was outside the Holy Barrier.

Was that even possible?

Nature called. I spoke aloud asking if anyone was around, but there was no answer. I had no choice but to step outside. The corridor had nightingale floors that screeched with every step. Thankfully, the bathroom was right around the end of the hall.

When I came back, a lamp was lit and an old bent-backed monk with a white mustache was sitting in the room. Even though I was only twelve at the time, I was already taller than him. He looked ancient. He was wearing rough, heavily patched robes, and even without saying anything gave off an air of affability. I knelt before him.

"How are you? Are you hungry?" he asked, smiling.

"Yes, a little."

"Since you came all the way here, I would like to treat you to our vegetarian cuisine, but unfortunately you have to fast until tomorrow morning. Can you do it?"

I was disappointed, but nodded anyway.

"By the way, I am the preceptor of this ravaged temple. My name is Mushin."

I straightened up reflexively. There was no one in Kamisu 66 who didn't know the name of the holy priest. Like Shisei Kaburagi who was revered for his powerful cantus, Mushin was loved and respected for his character.

"I'm…Saki Watanabe."

"I know your parents well," he said, nodding. "They were outstanding as children, and I expected them to become people the town could depend on. And they did, just as I thought."

I didn't know what to say, but it wasn't unpleasant hearing my parents being praised.

"But your dad really liked practical jokes. He used to throw fake haythatcher eggs at the bronze statue every day. The smell was terrible and we didn't know how to get rid of it. That was my statue, by the way. Ah, at that time, I was the headmaster at Harmony School."

"Oh, really?" It was my first time hearing that Head Priest Mushin had been a headmaster. I also found it hard to imagine that my father's personality used to be the same as Satoru's.

"Saki, you'll be entering Sage Academy soon and becoming an adult. But before that, you must seclude yourself in this temple for the night."

"Um, where is this temple?" I knew it was rude to interrupt him, but I couldn't contain my curiosity any longer.

"This is the Temple of Purity. Usually I preside over the Pure Land Temple at Hayring, but I come here to burn cedar sticks for coming of age ceremonies."

"By any chance, are we outside the Holy Barrier?"

Head Priest Mushin looked faintly surprised. "Yes. It's the first time you've been outside the barrier since you were born. But don't worry. There's a barrier that's just as powerful as the Holy Barrier around this entire area."

"I see."

Head Priest Mushin's calm voice alleviated my uneasiness.

"Well then, it's time to get ready. The lighting of the cedar sticks itself isn't so special; it's just a normal ceremony. Before that we'll have a short sermon. It's not a very formal one, so relax. Also, it might make you kind of sleepy, so it's okay if you fall asleep."

"But that's…"

"No, no, it's okay, really. Insomniacs have come to my temple for this exact purpose, though that was a long time ago. Anyway, spending an entire night not sleeping, but not doing anything else either is a waste of time, in my opinion. Once, there was a sermon I had to give, but no one wanted to listen to it, so I found a bunch of insomniacs and made it a kind of gathering for them. Within the first ten minutes, everyone was soundly asleep."

Head Priest Mushin's speech wasn't slow and stagnant like most people of his age. He had an ability to charm his audience. I laughed and talked with him easily.

Speaking of the sermon, it wasn't so boring that I fell asleep, but it wasn't particularly riveting either. It was about the Golden Rule. Do unto others, as you would have them do to you. Basically, to put yourself in the other person's shoes and think about how you would feel.

"…this seems simple, but is hard to truly understand. Take this for example. You and a friend are hiking up a mountain and get hungry along the way. Your friend brought a rice ball and starts eating it, while you have nothing. You ask if she'll share it with you and she says 'no, it's not necessary'."

"Why?"

"Because I can endure your hunger."

I was shocked. Even as an allegory, this logic was too unreasonable.

"I don't think there's anyone like that."

"Of course not, but what if there was? What would you think? What part of what they said is wrong?"

"Which part…" I was at a loss. "I think they've violated the Code of Ethics."

Head Priest Mushin shook his head, smiling slightly. "Something so obvious probably isn't in the Code of Ethics."

Of course, if they had written down every little rule like that, the Code of Ethics would have so many volumes that if would overflow from the library all the way to the Holy Barrier.

"The answer to this isn't something rational; it's emotional." High Priest Mushin thumped his chest.

"My heart?"

"Exactly. Can you feel your friend's pain in your own heart? If you can, you'd want to help them somehow, right? This is the most important thing to humans."

I nodded.

"Can you feel another's pain?"

"Yes."

"Not just hypothetically. Can you really take someone else's pain and perceive it as your own?"

"Yes, I can," I answered confidently. I thought the oral interview was over, but Head Priest Mushin's reaction was different from what I expected.

"Then why don't we try it out?"

While I was pondering what he meant by "try it out", Head Priest Mushin took a knife out from inside his robes and unsheathed it to reveal a dully-glinting blade. I was shocked.

"The experiment is, can you feel my pain when it is presented to you like this?" Without warning, he stabbed himself in the leg with the knife.

I stared, dumbfounded.

"With enough training, we can endure any pain inflicted on our bodies. Plus, at this age, I don't bleed as much anyway…" he mumbled disjointedly.

"Please stop!" I shouted, finally coming to my senses. My voice cracked and my heart thumped madly in my chest.

"This is for you. Can you really, truly feel my pain? If you can, then I'll stop."

"I can feel it, so please stop!"

"No, you can't feel it. You're still only imagining. Real pain comes from the heart."

"That's…" What was I supposed to do? My legs wouldn't move.

"Is it okay? Until you feel the pain, I have to keep doing this. This is what I must do to guide you."

"B-but, how can I…"

"Don't imagine it. Recognize it. You. Did. This. To. Me." High Priest Mushin's voice was full of pain. "Do you understand? You. Are. Making. Me. Suffer."

I thought my heart was going to stop. What in the world was I supposed to do to save him?

"Please, help me," he said in a low, hoarse voice. "Stop this, help me."

How should I explain the atmosphere then? It was completely irrational, but I gradually believed that I was actually torturing the head priest. Tears flowed unceasingly from my eyes.

Head Priest Mushin groaned in pain. The hand holding the knife in his leg was twitching slightly.

Then something unbelievable happened. My body stiffened and I was unable to move, my field of vision narrowed and there was a huge weight on my chest, leaving me breathless.

"Please. Don't. Kill. Me."

Those words triggered something. A sharp, stabbing pain started from the left side of my chest and ran all the way to the top of my head.

I lost my balance and fell sideways onto the tatami.

My heart. My breath, I couldn't breathe. My mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water.

I saw Head Priest Mushin peering down at me like he was observing a lab specimen.

"Please get a hold of yourself." His voice came from far, far away. "Saki, it's okay. Look, nothing happened to me."

Through blurry eyes, I saw him stand up like nothing had happened. There didn't seem to be a wound anywhere.

"Look carefully. I don't have any wounds. The knife is fake. It's made to not pierce anything."

When he pushed on the blade, it retracted into the handle.

I remained lying on the floor for a while, utterly confused.

The pain faded away and I could move again.

I got up, seething quietly at this prank. Before I could open my mouth to complain, the changes in my body took me by surprise.

"Shocking, isn't it? But with this, you've passed the final test," Head Priest Mushin's face had returned to its usual benevolent expression. "If you can feel another's pain as your own, there's nothing to worry about. It's time to grant you your own mantra."

My body felt normal again, but I still could do nothing but nod.

"But please don't forget the pain you felt. Remember it every once in a while and make it a part of you." His words went deep into my heart. "This is what makes humans different from beasts."

The monk who was praying threw some pill-shaped things and poured fragrant oil into the altar and the flames flared.

The sound of the monks chanting sutras behind me sounded like the echoing chirps of a thousand crickets.

After washing myself, I put on white clothes like those used to dress a corpse. I sat behind the praying monk and put my hands together.

The ritual continued without end as my fatigue peaked. It had to be close to morning. Scattered thoughts floated up and vanished like bubbles. I could no longer think straight.

Every time something was thrown into the flames, it was as if my sins and worries were being burned away, but the ritual was taking so long that I thought I must be a person with particularly deep sins and worries.

"Now, your heart and body have been sufficiently cleansed. From here, let the last of your worldly desires be burned away," Head Priest Mushin said from behind me.

I bowed once. Finally, I was being released.

"Look at the flames." The voice I heard from the darkness sounded like it was coming from the heavens. "Look at the flames."

I fixed my gaze on the fire dancing above the altar.

"Try to control the flames."

"I can't." Ever since the Spirit of Blessing came, I hadn't once tried to use my cantus.

"It's okay, you can do it. Make the flames sway."

I stared at the fire.

"To the left, to the right. From side to side…side to side."

It was hard to concentrate, but after a while, my focus suddenly sharpened and the flames flared up. The inner flame grew brighter and the heart of the flame was almost transparent. The outer edges of the flame flickered.

Move. Move.

No, it's not the flame, I realized all of a sudden. Fire is made of a bunch of shining particles, but they're too spread out to have much substance.

I have to move the air.

I saw that I had to move the heat haze around the flame. The clear, shimmering current of hot air.

I deepened my concentration.

Flow. Flow… Faster.

The movement of the heat haze sped up abruptly.

In the next instant the fire was whipping from side to side as if blown by gusts of wind.

I did it.

It was a brilliant moment of success.

I didn't believe that I could do it. That I could move something at will, without using my hand.

I took a big breath and once again reached out to the flames with my consciousness.

"That's enough. Stop." A severe voice cut in.

My concentration collapsed like a house of cards, the image I had in my mind swallowed by darkness.

"Your last desire is your cantus."

I wasn't able to comprehend what that meant right away.

"Cast away all your desires. In order to be enlightened, they must be purged by the flames."

I couldn't believe it. I just got my cantus. Why did I have to give it up again?

"You must return to the gods the power granted to you by heaven. From now on, your cantus will be sealed in this human emblem."

Disobedience was not allowed. A doll made of two pieces of folded paper was placed in front of me. On the head and torso were mysterious Sanskrit-looking characters.

"Control the emblem and make it stand."

This task was considerably harder than the last. In addition, my heart was too conflicted for me to concentrate.

But eventually, the emblem fluttered and stood up.

"Put all your emotions into the emblem."

Paper head. Paper body. Paper limbs.

An unmistakably human figure.

I felt my own body merging with the paper emblem. I sent strength into its legs, balancing like a daruma doll.

The paper figure stood up gently.

Once again, feelings of happiness and power flowed through me.

"Saki Watanabe, your cantus is sealed!" His voice rang through the temple, shattering the shining image I had in my mind.

Six long needles whistled through the air, piercing the emblem's head, body, arms and legs.

"All your desires have been burned away. Let the ashes return to the vast, wild earth."

The praying monk tossed the emblem into the fire.

The fire flared like an explosion, almost scorching the ceiling.

"Your cantus has been eradicated."

Stunned, I could only stare at the events unfolding before my eyes.

"Look at the flames," Head Priest Mushin commanded me again. "You can no longer control them anymore. Try it." His voice was emotionless.

I looked into the fire, but this time, I couldn't see anything. No matter how hard I tried, nothing changed.

Would I never be able to grasp that feeling of power again? Tears ran down my cheeks.

"In your devotion, you have abandoned your cantus," his voice was suddenly warm and gentle again. "By the compassion of the Buddha, you will receive a pure mantra, a new spirit and a your cantus, once again."

He hit me on both shoulders with a Zen stick. I hung my head, and the sound of chanting grew louder.

Head Priest Mushin leaned in close so that only I could hear and whispered my new mantra.

Having written up to here, I'm extremely perplexed.

No matter how I try, I can't write down my mantra.

Even now, our society puts a lot of importance on the meaning of our mantras. They're words offered to the gods that are the keys to activating our cantus. We are warned to never use them in vain lest the power be lost.

On the other hand, these are just the words to the spell — sounds without meaning. So revealing it here shouldn't cause any harm.

I want to understand the reasoning behind that. In the deepest parts of my subconscious is a natural defense against exposing my mantra. Even now, I can feel the hand holding the pen being restrained every time I try to write it down.

So for those who want to know what a mantra is, I've written an example below.

Namo ākāśagarbhaya oṃ ārya kamari mauli svāhā

Incidentally, this is the mantra of the Akasagarbha bodhisattva given to Satoru.

The rest of my initiation dragged on for a long time, so I won't write it all down. When it was finally over, the sky was brightening in the east, and everyone was exhausted.

I slept like a log for a full day afterwards. When I woke up, I spent a day in service with the studying priests, and the day after that I was allowed to go home.

Head Priest Mushin and the other monks in the Temple of Purity wished me good luck and bid me farewell under the leafing cherry trees. I got into the window-less houseboat once again and traveled back to the town — the journey only took two hours this time.

My parents hugged me tightly for a long time. There was a celebration that night; the table was filled with all my favorite dishes. There were oven-warmed yam dumplings, raw altered-protein flounder filets, savory tiger crab soup…

With that, my long childhood had come to an end. The next day, I would start a new life.

Sage Academy, like Harmony School, is in Hayring, but much farther to the north, near Pinewind. My teacher from Harmony School accompanied me into the stone building, but told me to enter the classroom alone. My mouth was dry with anxiety.

Immediately to the right of the open door was the podium. On the wall in front of me hung the academy's motto. On my left were amphitheater style seats, where thirty or so students were sitting quietly.

Mr. Endou waved me toward the podium and I felt my legs shaking as I approached. Never before had I been the focus of so many people; I felt naked and defenseless.

I couldn't even muster up the courage to look up at the class as I stood at the podium. I chanced a fleeting glance and saw that everyone's eyes were averted. That instant reminded me of something. Not Harmony School, but definitely some place I've been to before. What was it? The same ambience hovered over the class like a fog. It was a strange sense of deja vu.

"This is your new classmate, Saki Watanabe." Mr. Endou wrote my name on the whiteboard. Unlike the Harmony School teachers, he didn't actually write on the whiteboard. Using his cantus, he somehow made black particles gather on the board in the form of words.

"You're already friends with students from Harmony School, right? Please get along with those from other schools as well."

Applause rippled through the class. I realized that everyone was as nervous as I was.

Feeling slightly better, I looked up at the class and saw that Maria, Satoru and Shun were waving at me.

Upon closer inspection, I saw that roughly a third of the students were in the same grade as me in Harmony School. Although students entered the academy separately, it made the most sense to group them according to age. Realizing this alleviated my worries considerably and for the first time I wondered what I would be learning here.

During recess, the other Harmony School students gathered around me like they had been waiting for me forever.

"Took you a little while, didn't it," were Shun's first words. If Satoru had said the same thing, I would have snapped at him, but I just smiled.

"Sorry for making you wait."

"Seriously, I was almost tired of waiting," Maria said, turning my head to face her and rubbing her forehead against mind.

"I'm just a late bloomer. It's not like the Spirits of Blessing that come earlier are better, right?"

"True, but you're the last from Harmony School. Whatever the reason, your Spirit of Blessing was too lackadaisical," Satoru said, completely oblivious of his own shortcomings.

"I see you haven't changed at all…" as I said this, a question popped up in my mind. "Wait, last? That's not right, there were still some people left after me."

Everyone fell silent and their expressions went as blank as a shinshi's purity mask.

"…we don't study just theory here, we learn practical skills too. Did you know I'm the top of the class at surface water manipulation?"

"You suck at force exchange though."

"The teacher said that what's important at this point is just the mental image."

Everyone started talking at once. It all sounded like gibberish to me. They were discussing the classes, as if showing off the knowledge they had learned before me. I didn't like this feeling. But I fell into the habit that had been ingrained in us, namely, to pretend that certain forbidden topics never existed in the first place.

Since I couldn't really follow the conversation, I listened intently, and formed a rather strange first impression of the class. Unmistakably, I had felt the same thing at some time, somewhere.

When the bell rang and everyone was heading back to their seats, I suddenly remembered.

"Lotus Farms…"

Only Satoru's sharp ears heard my murmur.

"What was that?"

After a moment of hesitation, I answered.

"This class reminds me of that farm. Remember? The one we went to in Harmony School."

Hearing the word Harmony School, Satoru's expression became shrewd.

"Sage Academy is like the farm? What are you talking about?"

"Just the overall feeling is the same." There was an unpleasant feeling I couldn't quite pin down.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Satoru also seemed to be in a bad mood all of a sudden, but our conversation ended there as class started.

Lotus Farms, where we had gone for a social science field trip, is in the town of Gold. As the graduation period got closer, we were suddenly taken on numerous field trips. It seemed like they wanted us to think about what sort of job we wanted in the future. The sight of the production sites amazed us and made us want to hurry and grow up. The products made at pottery and glass workshops that were part of the craft guild were extraordinary. When we saw them using their cantus to create incredibly strong ceramic pieces and glass as clear as air, we all declared that we wanted to apprentice there after graduating from Sage Academy.

But the thing that left the deepest impact on us was on our last field trip to Lotus Farms.

Lotus Farms is a series of experimental farms spread out over the towns and the biggest collective farm in the town. The first one we went to was a saltwater rice paddy in Whitesand. The rice we eat comes from the paddies in Gold, but here were fields of rice immersed in saltwater. Using something called reverse osmosis, they're able to filter out the salt in the water. We sampled the rice, and to our surprise, found it completely edible, with only a hint of saltiness.

The next time, we went to a sericulture facility, where a lot of the silkworms spun rainbow cocoons. Not only did the fabric made from these silkworms not need dyeing, they also didn't fade or lose color when washed.

In the neighboring building were foreign species used for reference in selective breeding. Silk worms from Indonesia were known for their golden silk, Tasar silk worms from India made threads ten times thicker than usual, hundreds of silk worms from Uganda spinning cocoons the size of rugby balls, and more.

The best were the Hitachi silkworms kept in an isolated, airtight room. The two-meter long, three headed worms were feasting on copious amounts of mulberry leaves and simultaneously spitting out silk from one of its three mouths. It was as if they had forgotten that they were supposed to be making cocoons and were just spitting silk in all directions. The inside of the observation window had to be cleaned off often to stop the silk from covering it completely. The tour guide explained that since the insects were so big, they had trouble breathing, so oxygen was pumped into the enclosure. The concentration of oxygen was so high that if there were an open flame near, the whole thing would blow up, which is why the worms were kept in an air locked room.

Next to the sericulture farm were fields with potatoes, yams, onions, radishes, strawberries and other plants. This time it was the middle of winter and some of the fields were covered in snow-like bubbles. Potatoes and yams are susceptible to frost damage, so when the temperature dropped too much they used the bubbles produced by an insect called a seedbed bubbleblower to keep the plants warm. These bugs were originally a type of harmful pests known as bubbleblowers, but were mutated into a useful type with cantus.

The fields were also protected by huge wasps in shining red armor.

Crimson wasps were a hybrid of the fierce giant hornet and the brown hornet. They preyed exclusively on harmful insects while leaving humans and livestock alone.

Opposite the fields, on the farthest side of the farm was the barn.

I think there was a reason we never visited the barn until the very end. Unlike plants and insects, animals altered by cantus specifically for the purpose of producing large amounts of meat, milk and wool were probably unpleasant to look at. So it was a relief when we visited the cattle barn and saw only normal looking cows lined up before us.

"What the heck? It's all normal cows here."

You had to admire Satoru's insensitivity.

"That's not true," Shun pointed at a corner of the barn. "Aren't those pouch cows?"

We all turned to look.

"It really has a pouch!" Maria exclaimed.

Between the hind legs of a brown cow was a small white balloon.

"Oh, all the cows over there are pouch cows," said the guide, a well built man whose name I've forgotten. He seemed slightly uncomfortable, like we had touched upon a subject he would rather not discuss.

"How come you don't take the pouches off?" Satoru asked, oblivious of the guide's discomfort.

"Well…since the olden times, all dairy farmers have said that cows with pouches have a better immune system and are resistant to diseases. We're trying to determine if that's true or not."

Since we had not seen any altered animals in our field trips until now, I thought it was reasonable that we were intrigued by the pouch cows.

In order to explain better, I have a book called The Natural History of the New Japan Islands for reference. It's stamped "classified". This is the third class of books, treated with discretion because they have the potential to be harmful to the mind of the reader. Here is an excerpt.

Pouch cows, formerly called cow sac, received its name from the aforementioned pouch it has. It's an interesting coincidence that its name is similar to the rhizocephala.[*]

On the subject of rhizocephala, it is a crustacean related to the acorn barnacle. Resembling the sac from which it got its name, at first glance it does not seem remotely related to well known crustaceans like shrimp or crabs. This change came about as an adaptation in order to parasitize other crustaceans, like the Japanese mitten crab.

As a cyprid, the female rhizocephala attaches to the body of the crab and enters the infective state. It then injects a clump of somatic cells into the crab. These cells attach themselves inside the body then pierce through the abdomen and develop its sac. The sac is an ovary, and does not have limbs or digestive organs. The cells inside the body grow root-like structures that absorb nutrients from the crab.

The infected crab becomes infertile, a phenomenon called parasitic castration.

(Omitted)

On the other hand, cow sacs were known to be tumors in the cow's testicle or uterus. Since they didn't affect the cow's health, they were believed to be benign and overlooked. But in recent years, it was discovered to be an independent organism, like rhizocephala. Moreover, it had evolved to the point where it was now part of the animal, creating a new species of cow.

The origin of the pouch cow is uncertain, but the theory that it evolved by chance is largely accepted. This is likened to one embryo of a twin absorbing the other, who becomes a tumor.

[*] In Japanese both rhizocephala and pouch cows have the word for 'sac'

Pouch cow larvae are found in large quantities in the testicles of normal bulls. During mating season, the larvae are ejaculated along with normal sperm. They are around four centimeters in length, with no eyes or ears, two long forelimbs, a body similar to a hornworm's, and a needle-like ovipositor.

The larvae propel themselves with their forelimbs to climb around the host cow until they find an area where the skin is thin, and inject a clump of somatic cells. As the cells grow, a new pouch develops, and the host cow becomes a pouch cow. Accomplishing this, the larvae dry up and die about two hours later.

At first glance, the larvae bear no similarities to normal cows, but can still be categorized as beings of the artiodactyla order, bovidae class. The claws of the forelimbs are split like cow hooves. This is the only remaining characteristic that shows that the two animals share an ancestor.

There is debate about whether a pouch cow is really inseminating the host cow, or merely robbing it of the nutrients it would usually give to an egg.

There's a folktale, or perhaps it's an urban legend, surrounding the pouch cow. Once, the larva was caught climbing on a cow. While it was being removed, it let out a noise that sounded just like a cow's. The other cows heard it and became disturbed, all crying out at the same time. This author has had numerous chances to observe pouch cow larvae, but regrettably, no cries have been heard.

It's strange how we associated the miraculous power known as cantus with the strange animal called the pouch cow, silently eating its feed.

This probably isn't because we were managed just like these animals by our school, but because we were all burdened with an identity we were not yet aware of.

4

The house of cards rose in the blink of an eye.

I snuck a glance at Satoru sitting next to me. Looked like it was going well. He was already on the fourth layer. Satoru sensed that I was looking and spun the four of hearts card he was levitating with a smug expression on his face.

Determined not to lose, I focused on the house of cards before me. It was a simple task — stacking playing cards into pyramids — but actually doing it involves a lot of discipline in using your cantus.

First and foremost was concentration. The slightest touch or breath of wind would knock the house down. Next was spatial perception. Third was multitasking — you had to be able to pay attention to all that while looking out for signs that the house was about to fall and correct it in time.

Incidentally, there's a story saying that when Shisei Kaburagi tried this assignment, he was able to complete it instantly by imagining a pyramid made of eighty-four cards. But no one else has ever been witnessed doing such a thing, so it's probably just an exaggerated tale.

In Harmony School, we were instructed to build card houses on many occasions. I never thought that it would have been in preparation for Sage Academy.

"Saki, hurry it up," Satoru said, unnecessarily.

"This isn't a fair game. But don't worry, I won't lose to you."

"Stupid, competing amongst ourselves isn't going to do anything. Look at team five, they work really well together."

I looked over and saw that all the members of team five were moving at the same pace, moving steadily toward the tip of the pyramid.

"And like always, our ace is in top form."

As Satoru said, Shun was undeniably the best in our class. He had already built it up seven levels and was working on the eighth. No one else in the class could control cards the way he did, like the gentle flapping of butterfly wings. It was fascinating to watch.

"…but there's also someone holding us back," Satoru sighed, looking over the group.

Next to Satoru, Maria was working at almost the same speed as Shun, but her technique was sloppy and she had knocked over some of her cards twice already. But since she managed to fix it

quickly each time, her pace was the same as ours on the whole. Next to Maria, Mamoru was almost the exact opposite. He worked almost unbearably carefully, but the result that his house was extremely stable. However, his slow pace meant that he was just barely above average in the class.

The problem was Reiko, sitting the farthest end. She hadn't even completed one layer yet.

It was depressing watching her work. Her cards were shaking the same way a child's hand would shake if they were bad at building card pyramids. Reiko was from Gold town, so I'd never seen her in school before, but I have no doubts that she was also bad at making card houses back in Morality School.

Even so, her clumsiness was astounding. When it looked like she finally got the cards to stand up, it would collapse and she would have to start all over again.

"It's so bad it's almost funny," Satoru shook his head and turned back to his own cards. "As long as she's here we'll never win."

"So what? Reiko's a good person, she just hasn't had a breakthrough yet." Even as I said that, I knew it was a lie. Reiko Amano couldn't use her cantus well. No matter what task we were given, her results were always different from the dictated goals.

Earlier, we were playing a game similar to telephone in order to hone our image replication skills. Each team sits in a line and the first person is given an oil painting to look at. They then reproduce the picture as a sand drawing using their cantus and show it to the next person in line. That person only has a few seconds to look at the drawing before they have to reproduce it as accurately as possible. The team whose final drawing is the most faithful to the original wins.

For us, team one, I thought our image construction and transmission techniques were exceptional. Shun especially stood out from the rest of us. His pictures were so good they looked like photographs. The next best was Maria. Unfortunately, I was not as skilled as she is in producing accurate and artistic images.

If Satoru were first, he might not be able to do it, but he was great at copying sand drawings. I was the exact opposite; I was able to create sand drawings based on the originals. Mamoru was quite artistic and could produce beautiful pictures, but they weren't always accurate.

Out of the six of us, Reiko was always the one messing up. If I were to be perfectly honest, her sand drawings looked like marks in the sand left by the torturous struggles of a dying crab. No matter how closely I looked at her pictures, I had no idea what she was drawing. No matter what position she was placed in line, her drawings never looked like anything other than random scratches.

In the house of cards competition too, her slowness was a deciding factor in our loss. The team with the highest number of cumulative layers wins, but before that, each member must build at least seven stories.

And this time, Reiko made a fatal mistake.

I was concentrating so hard on my own cards that I'm still not entirely sure what she did. Her cards suddenly flipped through the air and smacked into Maria's.

Unsteady as it was, Maria's card house was the second tallest of the group. It was flattened in an instant.

"Ah, I'm s-sorry!"

Needless to say, Reiko was panicked. Maria sat stunned for a few moments before she began rebuilding her pyramid twice as quickly as she had been doing. But given how little time we had left, even if both Shun and Maria's pyramids were complete, it wouldn't have been enough. Before she could even complete the third layer, a whistle blew, signaling the end of the competition.

"I'm so sorry. I can't believe I did something like that…" Reiko apologized incessantly.

"Don't worry about it. I knocked it over a bunch of times myself, anyway," Maria said, smiling, but her eyes were empty.

Here, I'll give a brief introduction of team one. The six members are Shun Aonuma, Maria Akizuki, Satoru Asahina, Reiko Amano, Mamoru Itou, and me, Saki Watanabe. You might have noticed that the names are in alphabetical order, so it would have made sense for me to be in team five, but I somehow wound up in team one. Since three of my good friends are in the same team, I thought it was done as a special consideration to help me get used to Sage Academy.

After class that day, Maria, Satoru, Shun, Mamoru and I walked down a small path that ran along the canal near school. It wasn't that we didn't want to be friends with Reiko, since we did hang out with her pretty often, but that we felt it might be awkward for her to be around us after messing up so badly.

"I wanna be able to use my full power already," Satoru said, stretching.

Everyone felt the same way. Since we were still students, we couldn't use our cantus in public. Unlike the classes in Harmony Schools, the lectures at Sage Academy were long and tedious, but we had to go through them before our cantus would be unsealed for the practical course at the end of the day.

"When you get to use your full powers, I have to be sure to run away as far as I can," I teased.

"Why?" said Satoru sullenly.

"No particular reason."

"I already have perfect control. But you're clumsy as a drunk."

"I think you're both really good," said Shun, trying to placate both of us.

"Hearing this from you, I can't really be happy," Satoru kicked a pebble into the canal.

"Why?" Shun asked, genuinely confused. "I'm not lying. I really think that both of you are good. Your cards didn't go flying the wrong way or anything."

"Aah, stop it already," Maria sighed, covering her ears.

"Hmph, Shun's unconsciously looking down on us. Don't you think so, Saki?"

To tell the truth, I agreed with Satoru, but I didn't say that.

"Don't lump me in with you. You're the only one being looked down on."

"What? No I'm not," Satoru grumbled, then suddenly fell silent.

"What's wrong?" Maria asked.

Satoru pointed to an area of the canal six or seven meters ahead of us. "Look at that."

There were two humanoid shapes shrouded in dirt-colored robes.

"…queerats?" Maria whispered, twisting a lock of red hair between her fingers.

"Yeah. What are they doing?"

Shun was fascinated, as was I. This was the first time I had ever been this close to a queerat.

"We shouldn't stare," Mamoru warned. His curly hair always made it look like his head was exploding. "In Friendship, if we saw queerats, we were told not to stare or get close. Didn't they ever tell you in Harmony School?"

Of course we had been, but it's human nature to want to do things you've been told are forbidden. We advanced slowly, keeping an eye on their movements.

I remembered what my father had told me when I was younger. As we got closer, we saw that the queerats were in the process of cleaning the trash that collected in the bends in the canal where the water flowed slower. They were diligently scooping up leaves and twigs with nets on bamboo poles.

Something like this could be done in an instant with cantus, but no doubt humans find it too boring to be worth their time.

"They're working pretty hard."

"But it looks hard to hold a net with hands like that."

I was thinking the same thing as Maria.

"It sure seems like it. Their skeletons are structured differently from ours, just standing on two legs is hard enough."

It was just as Shun said. Even though we couldn't see their bodies covered by the robes, the arms holding the nets looked rodent-like, and they balanced unsteadily on their hind legs.

"…we shouldn't be watching them," Mamoru took a few steps away from us and turned his back to the queerats.

"Come on, nothing's gonna happen…hey, watch out!" Satoru ran forward shouting.

One of the queerats had tried to lift up a net laden with leaves that was heavier than it had anticipated. With a huge wobble, it pitched forward.

The other queerat tried to catch it, but was a second too late. The first queerat fell headfirst into the canal.

There was a huge splash. We rushed forward.

The fallen queerat was struggling under the water about a meter away. It couldn't swim very well. In addition, leaves and twigs were tangled all around it, preventing it from moving.

Its companion dashed back and forth in a panic — it didn't seem to realize that it could hold out the net for the queerat to grab.

I took a deep breath and concentrated.

"Saki, what are you trying to do?" Maria asked, surprised.

"Helping it."

"Huh, how?"

"It's better not to have anything to do with them!" Mamoru shouted in a cowardly voice from behind.

"It's fine, I just have to lift this part to get him back to shore. It'll be easy."

"You can't be serious…"

"You can't just use your cantus whenever you want."

"I think you should stop too."

"If I don't do anything, it'll die!"

I calmed down, drove their voices out of my mind and chanted my mantra.

"But this is really bad."

"We were taught to be compassionate to all living things, right?"

I focused on the queerat bobbing in the water. The problem was that it kept moving and all the leaves and debris made it hard to get a grasp on its size.

"…it's easier to lift it up along with the leaves," Shun said, realizing my dilemma.

I cast him a grateful glance and tuned out the others.

I concentrated on lifting the mass of leaves, imagining it rising up. Finally, it broke the surface tension and hovered above the water.

Water trapped in the pile cascaded into the canal. Bits of leaves that had escaped my notice fluttered down. The queerat should be somewhere in there, though I couldn't see it. I slowly guided it toward the shore. Everyone stepped back to make room.

I gently dropped it on the path.

The queerat was alive.

Thrashing and kicking, it managed to turn over and cough up a flood of water and bubbles. Up close, it was pretty big. It was probably a meter tall fully upright.

"Wow, it looked like you just scooped it up with a big net. That's a perfect levitation."

"Yeah, thanks to your advice."

As I was basking in Shun's praise, Satoru cut in.

"What do we do now? If the school finds out…"

"As long as they don't find out, it's fine."

"I'm saying what if they find out?"

Maria came to my rescue.

"Everyone absolutely has to keep this a secret, okay? For Saki's sake."

"Okay," said Shun without hesitation.

"You too Satoru, got it?"

"You don't have to tell me. But what if it gets out somehow?"

"It doesn't seem like anyone saw us. As long as no one says anything, it'll be fine," Maria replied. "Mamoru?"

"What?"

"What do you mean, what…"

"Nothing happened today. I didn't see anything. I had nothing to do with the queerats or anything."

"Good boy."

"But what do we do about this?" Satoru wrinkled his nose at the queerat.

"It's not going to talk to anyone."

"Can queerats talk?" Shun looked curious.

I approached the queerat who was still lying on the ground. I wondered if it was injured somewhere. When the other queerat saw me, it also fell prostrate to the floor.

They were obviously afraid of humans.

"Hey, I saved your life, got it?" I tried to speak gently.

"You shouldn't talk to queerats!" Mamoru shouted in a strangled voice from somewhere behind me.

"Hey, can you hear me?"

The soaked queerat nodded silently. Looking a lot more comfortable now that it was back on all fours, it crawled over to me and made a movement like it was kissing my shoes.

They both bowed. Somehow, that simple action was full of meaning. Suddenly, I really wanted to know what their faces looked like.

"Hey, look this way," I clapped my hands lightly.

"Saki, stop it already," Maria sounded slightly stunned.

"Seriously, you can't…the queerats," Mamoru sounded even farther away now.

"Do you understand what I'm saying? Lift your head up."

The queerats lifted their heads nervously.

Somehow, I had been expecting a cute face like a field mouse's, so I was shocked.

Under the hood was a face uglier than any I had ever seen on a living thing. It had a flat snout, more like a pig's that a rat's, loose pale skin that hung in folds and was covered in brown, downy hairs, and shiny, beady eyes.

"Th★k yu Thakyu. Kikikikiki. Kakakakaga★…ds. Gods."

The queerat suddenly started speaking in a high squeaky voice. I froze in surprise.

"It's talking…" Maria murmured.

The other three were dumbfounded.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"§@★#◎&∈∂Å♪" it chirped in a sing-song voice. Spit frothed at the corners of its mouth.

I knew it was saying its name, but there's no way to write it out in Japanese, not that I even remember what it was.

"Well it looks like we won't have to worry about them ratting us out," Satoru said, sounding relieved. "It's not like anyone will understand what they say."

Our anxiety gone, we started laughing. But for some reason, a chill ran up my spine as I looked at the queerats.

It felt like I had touched on something taboo that was hidden deep in my heart.

"Although we can't use their names, there should be some other way to tell them apart," Shun mused.

"You can tell by their tattoos."

Surprisingly, it was Mamoru who had spoken.

"Tattoo? Where?"

"Somewhere on their forehead. It should have their colony and identification number," Mamoru said, his back still turned.

I put my hand tentatively on the queerat's head and lifted its hood. It stayed docile like a trained dog.

"There it is."

Down the length of its forehead, the words "Goat 619″ were tattooed in blue ink.

"What do these words mean?"

"It has to be the colony's emblem," Shun said.

Queerats have three characteristics that are unlike most other animals.

The first is their appearance that is the basis for their name. Queerats resemble hairless rats and are around sixty centimeters to a meter in length. Standing upright, they're between 1.2 and 1.4 meters. In some cases they can be as tall as an average human.

Second, even though they are very clearly mammals, they are eusocial, like ants or bees, and live in colonies with a queen. This is a trait that comes from their ancestor, the east African naked mole rat. Small colonies have only around two or three hundred workers, but large ones can have thousands, even up to ten thousand, workers.

Third, queerats are far more intelligent than dolphins or chimpanzees. Some would even say they are as intelligent as humans. Those who pledge allegiance to humans and become "civilized colonies" are given protection in return for their tribute and labors. The colonies are named after various insects.

For example, the colony with the greatest strength and most often recruited for public works operations is the Giant Hornet colony. Other colonies dotted around Kamisu 66 are the Wood Ant, Deerfly, Dragonfly, Spider Wasp, Robber Fly, Giant Stag Beetle, Cave Cricket, Paper Wasp, Ground Beetle, Tiger Beetle, Goat Moth, Diving Beetle, Cricket, Blue Centipede, Praying Mantis, Pyraloid Moth, Garden Tiger Moth, Tachina Fly, Millipede, Orb Spider, Cone-Headed Katydid, and more.

"The 'Goat' probably stands for the Goat Moth colony," Shun said.

"They're probably all tattooed, since there are so many of them you can't recognize them just by sight."

"Then this guy is a worker of the Goat Moth Colony."

Goat Moth was a small colony with only two hundred workers.

"Goa★moth. Goat Moth. Chichichi. Co★ney…Grrrrr," it said, shivering.

"It looks cold."

"It's completely soaked. And since queerats live in burrows, I imagine their body temperatures are naturally lower," Shun said.

We let the queerats go. The two of them bowed low as we left. No matter how many times I looked back as we walked away, they remained bowed.

"As I thought, there's only the dung beetle method, right?" Maria said.

This was about a month after the queerat incident.

"That's way too obvious," Satoru objected. "Every team is going to have thought of that. Plus, it's impossible to control the ball like that."

We were having a discussion around a lump of clay sitting on the desk.

"What if we made a big ring and put the ball inside? That way, the ball will move with the ring wherever we want it to go," I said, swinging my legs from my perch on the desk. The idea had come to me out of the blue and I thought it wasn't half bad.

"But it might lose power halfway through, and what if the ball rolls over the ring?" Satoru objected again.

I was about to snap at him when Shun pointed out something rather more important.

"It'll be hard to make sure the ring stays on the ground the whole time. If even one part of it floats up, we'll get a penalty."

"…right," I admitted.

"We're not getting anywhere just thinking about it. Why don't we just try it out? That way we'll get a feeling of how much clay we'll need to use to make the pusher."

As Maria suggested, we allocated about half the clay to making the pusher and the other half to making attackers.

"Is this it?" Satoru sounded disappointed.

"I wonder how much the ball weighs," Maria mused.

Shun folded his arms and thought. "It's made of marble, so I'm guessing over ten kilos."

"That's about how much clay we have total. So in other words, the pusher is about half that weight at most," Satoru sighed.

"But as the clay dries out while it's baked, it'll also get lighter, right?"

"Oh yeah! So then at he very end, the pusher will only be about the third of the ball's weight."

Everyone else still looked confused, but I couldn't help smiling when Shun agreed with me.

"So we'll have to push it from behind after all," Mamoru said.

"Now we're back to the same idea."

The ball tournament was five days from now. That means that in those five days, we had come up with a basic strategy, make a working pusher, attackers and defenders out of clay, and learn to control them perfectly.

Here I'll explain the rules of the tournament. There are two teams, the offense and the defense. The offense rolls a large marble ball across the field into the goal while the defense tries to block. The total time allowed for one round is ten minutes, and the team that takes the least time to score a goal is the winner. In the case where neither side scores, both teams play defense as well as offense in a tiebreaker match where the first team to score wins.

Throughout the match, you can only use your cantus, but there is one serious restriction. You are not allowed to alter the ball or the field with your cantus. That means we have to be good at controlling our pieces, the pusher and attackers when we were the offense, and the defenders when we were on defense. In addition, our pieces are not allowed to lose contact with the ground. If we were allowed to use floating pieces, we would be able to use the ball to absorb any impacts the pusher might sustain.

The field constructed in the inner courtyard of the school is two meters wide and ten meters long, and paved with sandy dirt and patches of grass so that it required considerable concentration just to push the ball in the a straight line. The defense could put the goal wherever they wanted, but could not do anything else, like making potholes or mountains to protect it.

The pieces only have to be within the weight limits. We are free to decide what shape, or how many pieces we wanted to use, but the more pieces we use, the harder it is to control them all.

One more important restriction is that we are not allowed to attack the opponent's pusher. Otherwise, everyone would just target the pusher and it would be destroyed before the other team had a chance to do anything. However, only one pusher is immune to attack, so while we are allowed to use more than one, it is disadvantageous to do so. Most teams only used one pusher.

"So, is this good for the pusher?" Shun asked, his forehead glistening with sweat.

While we were all fooling around with the clay, only Shun had the capabilities to freely shape it to his will. It was impossible for the rest of us. The overall shape was a short cone with a shallow rounded bottom like a boat's to help it glide on the field. In order to control the ball, there were two arms coming out of it at a hundred-twenty degree angle from the front. It looked like a person with his arms outstretched.

"That's pretty good. It's simple, but still looks cool," Maria commented.

"So now all we need are attackers. Since Shun is focusing on working the pusher, we should split up the rest of the work among the rest of us," Satoru said, taking the opportunity to hand out tasks to us.

"How is team one doing?" Mr. Endo poked his head in, smiling at us. His round face, framed by his hair and beard, somehow earned him the weird nickname "Sun Prince".

"We've just finished the design for the pusher," Satoru said, proudly showing off the model.

"Oh, you've done a pretty good job in such a short time."

"Yup, we're thinking of hardening it now."

"Who's controlling the pusher?"

"Shun."

"Just as I expected," Mr. Endou nodded.

"Well, the rest of you work hard on the attackers."

"Yes sir!" We replied energetically.

Later, after a heated discussion, we decided on five attackers. Shun would control the pusher and an attacker simultaneously while the rest of us each had an attacker.

At this time, no one remembered that there used to be one more member in team one.

Our first round was against team five. That was a stroke of luck. Rumor had it that team three had built the best pieces and was the favorite to win the competition, and that team two had been spotted behaving suspiciously.

A round of rock-paper-scissors determined us to be the first to attack. Since this was our first match, we were nervous to see what team five's defenders would look like. They had six wall-like defenders moving from side to side, blocking the entire width of our path.

We huddled together in a circle, each of us silently reciting our mantras.

"As we expected, they're using the most basic strategy," Maria whispered, looking delighted.

"This won't even take half a minute," Satoru chuckled like he'd already won.

"Let's break through the center," Shun said quietly. "With that kind of defense, we can break through wherever we want, but it looks like the middle of the field is the flattest."

When our pusher and attackers came onto the field, all the members of team five looked rattled.

The pusher glided slowly into position with its arms up behind the ball.

The attackers were deployed in a neat formation. Three were positioned in a triangle in front of the ball and the other two were guarding either side of it.

The vanguard attackers were shaped like triangular pyramids, with the tip pointed forward. They looked like paper airplanes because the long edge of the pyramid was touching the ground, and

the flat side was facing up. The two guards were bottom heavy, shaped like squashed cylinders, with numerous protrusions on the surface. Actually the protrusions had no real purpose, but had the effect of making the guard look sturdier.

"Play fair, work together as a team and do your best. Got it?" the Sun Prince announced, and blew the whistle to start the match.

The vanguard advanced slowly. The pusher was still building up power, so the heavy ball stayed where it was. While it was stationary, the ball was vulnerable, but trying to rush it too much risked damaging the pusher. Then again, since Shun was controlling it, such a blunder was unimaginable.

The defenders couldn't gather up the courage to advance and continued wavering uselessly from side to side.

The ball finally started rolling slowly forward. It gradually gathered speed and hurtled down the field with the three attackers leading the charge.

Team five finally realized our plans and hurried to gather their defenders in the middle, but it was too late. We were going to crush them in a single blow. The attackers plowed through the defender's heavy walls like they were made of paper. A second later, the marble ball rumbled past. All that happened in the blink of an eye.

The second we broke through their defense, team five was defeated. The marble ball made straight for the goal and fell into the hole with a resounding thud. The time was twenty-six seconds, faster than Satoru had predicted.

"I wish they had tried harder; that wasn't even a competition," Satoru said.

"Seriously, it was like they didn't have a defense at all." Even the usually quiet Mamoru agreed.

But if we became complacent, things might turn out bad.

"The other side still gets to attack," I tried to get them to focus. "We haven't won yet."

"We've basically already won though, right? No matter how I think of it, there's no way they can score a goal in under twenty-six seconds," Satoru said, still smirking.

"But we never know what might happen. Don't get caught off guard," Shun said as we moved our defenders onto the field.

When we saw the pieces team five was using, we were all dumbstruck.

Since their defenders were so plain, we had been expecting the same of their attackers. Unfortunately we had grossly underestimated them. They had used a cleverly deceptive all or nothing strategy.

"What is that? Huh?" Maria said in a low voice. "All six of them look the same."

The pieces were rectangular, with a protruding arm like a bell hammer.

"They made all of them pushers," Satoru whispered.

The Sun Prince took one of the pushers and drew a red circle on it, indicating that it was the one we were not allowed to attack.

"But we're allowed to attack all the others right? So that one still doesn't have any defenders to protect it…" I said.

"It's okay if one or two pushers are damaged. If all six pieces push, any of our defenders would be crushed by the speed of the ball," Satoru answered.

So that's how it was. The whistle sounded and the ball started rolling, quickly gathering speed.

Four of our defenders are shaped like doorstops, the idea being that we could wedge them under the ball to slow its movement and throw it off track. But two of them were sent flying by the speed of the ball before they could do anything.

The two that were left went after the pushers on the edge. One managed to flip a pusher over, but with five remaining, the ball showed no signs of slowing down.

"This is bad. At this rate…" Satoru shouted.

The ball was moving a lot faster than ours had been, so if it scored a goal, we would lose.

Our trump card was our fifth defender, sitting in the middle of the field. It took aim down the path the ball was traveling.

"Shun, I'm leaving it to you!" Satoru shouted.

The defender was shaped like a thick disk, with a knob at the bottom where it touched the ground. When the ball rolled onto the defender, it would spin a hundred-eighty degrees, sending the ball back where it had come from. It was Shun's brilliant idea.

The ball came barreling down the path at an incredible speed. But I had no doubt that Shun would be able to time it just right.

However, something unexpected happened. The ball hit an uneven patch on the path and jumped a little into the air.

Shun instantly adjusted the defender so the ball wouldn't jump over it.

The ball landed with on the defender with an unpleasant cracking sound. Although Shun spun the defender, the ball bounced back up again, and continued on, its path unchanged.

"It's too late now…" Satoru said dejectedly.

At this speed, it wouldn't take twenty-six, but more like sixteen seconds to reach the goal. Just as I looked away, Maria shouted.

"Ah! What's that?"

I looked up and saw an unprecedented scenario unfolding before me. The ball had gathered so much speed that teams five had completely lost control of it.

One of the pushers was pulled over in front of the ball and crushed.

The forces directing the ball became unbalanced and the ball swerved to one side.

There was no way to stop the ball anymore. It missed the goal by a large margin and flew off the field.

"Since team five can no longer continue, team one is the winner," the Sun Prince's voice sounded like a voice from heaven.

"Yes!"

"We passed the first round!"

"Team five really sabotaged themselves. Probably because their tactics were too extreme."

As we gathered together to celebrate our victory, I realized Shun was standing outside the circle.

"What happened?" I asked.

Shun turned toward me, holding the defender and looking dejected.

"This is bad. It cracked."

"Huh?"

Everyone gathered around Shun. Since the clay was baked at high temperatures, it should have the strength to withstand the weight of the marble ball on top of it. All the same, we never expected the ball to jump and fall onto the disk.

"Well we don't know if we still have one or two matches left, but does this mean we won't be able to use it?" Maria asked.

"Yeah, it'll probably break the next time a ball rolls onto it. It'll be impossible to spin it and throw the ball off course."

"So we have no choice but to go out with only four defenders…"

We tried to come up with countermeasures, but couldn't think of anything good, so we decided to take a break and go find out who our next opponents were.

Since there are five teams, the numbers are uneven for a tournament. How they do it at Sage Academy is, two pairs of teams are picked by lottery to compete, and the two winning teams draw straws. The winner proceeds directly to the final round and the loser fights the team that was seeded in the first round. The winner in that round becomes the other finalist.

Depending on your luck, you could win the tournament with just two bouts, or have to do all three.

In any case, we went to watch the bout between team three and four. As rumored, team three was strong, and we got to see both their offense and defense.

Their pusher was a complex curved shape, like a horseshoe, that could control the ball perfectly. Their attackers were similar to ours, but seemed more refined.

What surprised us was how they used their two defenders, which were shaped like kokeshi. Between the two stretched a rope made of wet clay. When the ball rolled over the rope, it naturally wrapped itself around the ball and stopped it from moving forward. Although team four eventually made it to the goal, they lost a large amount of time.

"They're pretty smart to think of that," Satoru said grudgingly.

"We were wrong to assume we had to use hardened clay."

"It seemed like they were pretty confident that they could cause their opponents to lose enough time to ensure their own victory."

"Team three is definitely going to win," Maria said with a rare look of admiration.

Team three beat team four by a huge margin of twenty-two seconds to seven minutes and fifty-nine seconds. We drew straws against team three and fortunately got to advance directly to the finals.

"Looks like we got lucky."

"Since we have time, let's think of a good strategy."

"Can you fix the disk?"

"My cantus isn't powerful enough to bake more clay onto it to restore it perfectly. The most I can do is patch it up temporarily."

While Shun, Satoru and I tried to work out a solution. Maria and Mamoru went to watch the semifinal bout between teams three and two.

"In any case, lets try to fill in the cracks on the disk first."

"Can we get some clay to fix this?"

Satoru went to relay my question to the Sun Prince. In the end, we were told that if we could exchange some of our pieces for the same amount of clay the pieces weighed. But since baked clay was lighter than wet clay, the amount we would get in return was a lot less.

"There's nothing we can do about it. There was one defender that was damaged earlier, so let's trade that in."

We filled in the cracks and Shun hardened the clay with his cantus. How should we use the leftover clay? I kneaded it into a ball, and then flattened it until it was a paper-thin.

Wait a minute. This might…

"Saki, stop playing with it," Satoru said.

"Hey, we might be able to beat team three with this."

"What are you talking about?"

Shun looked over from the repaired disk. "Did you just think of something?"

I nodded tentatively, and told them about my idea.

"Amazing, you're a genius."

My ears reddened at Shun's compliment.

"Yeah, well it's a pretty cheap trick, but they definitely won't be expecting it," Satoru said. As usual, he was trying to insult me, but he couldn't deny that the idea was good.

"We should do it, Satoru. There's no other way."

"Yeah, I guess."

"We don't have time to try anything else."

We all set to work flattening a new piece of clay and attaching it to the one I made earlier. Since we were all working on the same thing, we couldn't use our cantus, so we had no choice but to do everything by hand. We finished just as Maria and Mamoru burst into the room.

"The semifinals just ended. And something really bad happened!"

"Don't tell me, we're up against team three? But we have a plan against them," Satoru said, as if he was the one who had come up with the idea.

"No," Maria said. "Team three lost. Team two is our opponent in the finals!"

5

We met team three walking out as we were heading to the inner courtyard.

"I really thought we would be going against you guys in the finals," I said to Hiroshi.

"Same here, I thought we would win," Hiroshi said regretfully. "If only this hadn't happened…" He held out the horseshoe-shaped pusher. A large part of the bottom had been torn off.

"How did that happen?"

"One of the defenders smashed into it on accident," Hiroshi said, running his finger over the broken edges. "The ball started rolling the wrong way and it took us over a minute to get it back on track."

"In the end, team two won with a minute and thirty six seconds against a minute forty one seconds. That was just so cruel, don't you think?" The most arrogant girl in the class, Misuzu, put her hand on Hiroshi's shoulder and sighed.

"It's their fault they hit you."

"Well it was an accident, so what can you do about it," Hiroshi said unconvincingly. "Be careful," he said as he left. "Who knows what will happen in the finals."

Hearing something like that before a match felt like some sort of omen. We started paying extra attention to everything around us. And when we saw team two's attacker, we were taken aback.

"Is it riding on a wheel?" Satoru whispered disbelievingly.

"We considered that too, and decided not to do it because the axel wouldn't hold up. How strange. Isn't it a bad idea to do this with clay?"

Shun squinted at the attacker.

"Look closely; it's a ball, not a wheel."

The main body of the pusher had a ball set into the bottom. Since you could only see about half of it, it looked like a wheel.

"It looks like the body is just riding on the ball. If something bumps into it, won't it fall off?" Satoru said calculatingly. "They should have stuck it in all the way."

"No, if they put it in as far as possible, it'll be easy for sand to get in, which would be a disaster. But even as it is now, I think it would break soon anyway," Shun said doubtfully.

"If sand stops the ball-wheel from moving, then it's the same as just pushing it normally, right? They probably just want to get a good start to break through our defense," Maria said calmly.

Our questions were answered as soon as the match started.

"Two of them…!" I exclaimed in surprise.

The two aces of team two, Ryou and Akira, were both controlling the pusher.

Ryou was probably operating the body of the pusher to direct the marble ball, while Akira concentrated on keeping the two halves together as well as removing anything that might jam the ball-wheel. Having two people use their cantus in such close proximity is dangerous, so most people would avoid having multiple people control one piece, but in this case the benefits far outweigh the risk.

Since the ball-wheel didn't create much friction against the ground, they could move it smoothly with their cantus. Even when they were moving as fast as team five had been, they had perfect control over the marble ball.

Even though we tried as hard as we could to defend, the pusher zigzagged easily through the gaps in our defenders.

Satoru's defender pulled a sharp U-turn chasing after the pusher and crashed into Mamoru's slow-moving one, sending it flying off the field.

"It's damaged," I told Shun, sighing.

"Looks like it. That pusher is really something. Now we can only count on your idea working."

We stopped controlling the defenders and stood by to monitor the bout. Seeing this, the members of team two seemed to think that we had given up and rushed ahead triumphantly. Then they came to an abrupt halt and looked around, bewildered.

"What's going on? There's no goal," Manabu shouted at us.

"There is," Shun replied.

"Where?"

"We don't have to tell you guys anything," Satoru said smugly.

"Hey, stop the time! Something's wrong," Manabu complained.

"Don't you dare," Maria warned the timekeeper, a student from team four. "Don't stop the time until one side has won."

"I'm serious! How can we continue the match if there's no goal?"

"Like I said, there is one," Shun said calmly to the angry Manabu.

"Look for it. Though it'll cost you time," Satoru taunted.

Even as his teammate, I thought Satoru was being annoying. To the enemy, he must be absolutely infuriating.

"We're just wasting our time if there's no goal."

"There is a goal. If there isn't, then we'd be in violation of the rules, and lose the match," Shun said quietly.

Manabu looked around suspiciously. If we could keep this up for a little longer, they will have wasted almost two whole minutes.

"…it's hidden, isn't it," one of the members suddenly realized.

Although they scanned the field desperately, the goal was nowhere to be seen.

"This is cheating!" Manabu growled through gritted teeth.

"There's no rule that says you can't hide the goal."

"Yes there is! Altering the field is a huge violation."

"Well, we didn't change the field in any way. Shall we give you a hint?" Satoru asked.

Afraid that he would let something slip in the heat of the moment, I quickly interrupted.

"We'll tell you the trick later. But hadn't you better keep looking? This is cutting into your time, you know."

Manabu looked perplexed, but went back to searching for the goal. Even if he found it now, more than a minute would have passed. And it was also possible that he might just never find it. The goal was perfectly covered by the thin clay disk disguised to look like the sandy ground. Much like how a ray burrows part of itself into the ocean floor to blend in, the edge of the disk was concealed by sand. (Contrary to Satoru's claim about not altering the field at all, what we were doing was probably just short of breaking the rules.)

For a while, team two pushed the ball around, searching fruitlessly for the goal. Then by a stroke of luck, they managed to roll on top of the disk. Since the disk was only made right before the match, it wasn't properly strengthened and couldn't hold up the weight of a ten-kilo ball. It broke in half and the ball fell into the goal.

"Ah, it breaks too easily, just as we thought."

"But it's fulfilled its purpose. They took over three minutes so it'll be an easy victory for us," Satoru said optimistically.

We were all taken by his enthusiasm. There was no way team two's defenders were strong enough to stop us for three minutes.

Even as we switched sides and moved our pusher onto the field, we were still full of confidence.

We didn't realize anything was wrong until team two started approaching us in waves with over ten defenders. Each person controlled at least two and attacked indiscriminately, slamming relentlessly into our attackers. Since there were so many, we couldn't stop them all. Some slipped through and headed straight for the ball.

Even in the face of the onrushing defenders, Shun kept moving the ball forward calmly. Since we still had three minutes to spare, there was no hurry.

We were almost halfway across the field; even though only a minute had passed, we could already see the goal up ahead. Even though team two had many defenders, they were small and light and didn't have the strength to stop the pusher from continuing forward. Victory was within our grasp.

In that moment, the ball stopped jerkily as if held back by a tether. Shun looked startled. When he tried pushing the ball harder, something happened.

A defender came flying in from the side, slipped past the ball and rammed straight into the pusher.

With a high, clear sound like a struck bell, pieces of ceramic went flying through the air.

Everyone gasped. The defender flew off the field, and we saw that our pusher's left arm was broken.

Even though the match hadn't been stopped, all of us, and the members of team two, were frozen in shock. All except one person.

Another defender came in from the same direction and pushed the ball. It slowly rolled off the field.

Who did that? I looked over team two's dumbfounded faces and glimpsed Manabu grinning broadly. Instinctively, I turned away, feeling like I had seen something I wasn't supposed to.

"Hey! The hell are you doing?" Satoru shouted furiously. "You just…you just," he couldn't even bring himself to say the rest.

"Sorry, it was an accident," Manabu said.

"An accident? That's just an excuse," Maria yelled.

"Okay, stop the time," the Sun Prince stepped between us.

The timing of his appearance was impeccable; he had probably been watching us from somewhere.

"It's unfortunate, but because of the accident, the final match is a draw."

"What! But the other side violated the rules, right?" Shun said forcefully in a rare show of protest.

"No, it was just an accident. Both team one and team two can be considered winners, okay?"

Having heard what the teacher said, no one else dared to complain.

The tournament that had gotten the entire class riled up ended on this unexpected note.

"I can't believe this. He definitely did it on purpose!" Maria seethed. "Team three even warned us before the match."

"Yeah, no way it was an accident," Mamoru said in agreement.

"He planned the whole thing," Satoru chimed in. "Slipping past the ball, breaking the pusher's arm, it was all part of the plan. Don't you think so, Shun?"

Shun stayed silent, his arms crossed.

"What? Don't tell me you believe him?"

Shun shook his head.

"No…I'm thinking about what happened before that."

"Before?"

"The pusher suddenly stopped, almost as if it had hit a wall."

"Huh?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. The pusher felt really strange. And it's not like there was anything on the ground stopping it."

We were at a loss for words. Shun had the sharpest senses out of all of us, and he wasn't the type to just make up stuff like this.

In that case, the only possible explanation was that someone had used their cantus to stop our ball. Apart from breaking the tournament rule about using your cantus directly on the ball, the fact that someone had interfered with another person's cantus – I've mentioned this before – was a blatant violation of the Code of Ethics. If two cantus were to come in contact with each other, a

rainbow interference pattern would appear and space would become distorted, creating an extremely dangerous environment.

In other words, someone in team two was okay with breaking the most fundamental of rules.

Imagining a person doing that was so disturbing it felt like the ground was about to give way beneath my feet. That day, we were silent on the way home. Everyone was probably in a state of shock. But even then, we didn't know the true nature of the fear that writhed deep inside us.

During puberty, even the smallest problems often feel like the end of the world. But our young, naive minds do not stay worried for long; we soon forget what it was that was causing our anxiety in the first place.

In addition, thanks to a subconscious defense mechanism we call forgetfulness, even more serious issues that would cause us to question the world we live in disappear from our minds like wisps of smoke.

Once the ball tournament was over, we turned our attention to the most important event Sage Academy held each year, summer camp. Even though the name makes it sound happy and carefree, it was actually an action-packed weeklong camp where the teams paddled up the Tone River and lived in tents without any adult supervision. We had to have our teacher approve our itinerary to make sure it didn't clash with another team's schedule, but that was the only input we would get from them. This would be our first time going outside the Holy Barrier since our visit to the Temple of Purity, so everyone was as excited and nervous as if we had been told we were going to explore a new planet.

Our anticipation and anxiety grew ever more intense each day, and every time we saw each other, someone had a new story or rumor or theory they had heard about summer camp. Although none of these discussions were based in fact, and thus weren't actually helpful for our trip, they took our minds off of our worries.

And so, the bitter aftertaste from the unsatisfactory conclusion of the ball tournament did not linger long on our tongues. We did not remember the long-absent Reiko Amano, nor were we concerned with the fact that another student, Manabu Katayama, had disappeared from our midst.

Of course, this lack of thought itself is undeniable proof that our memories were being meticulously and deftly manipulated.

"Saki, row properly," Satoru complained for about the thirtieth time.

"I am doing it properly, you're the one that's not cooperating," I responded for the thirtieth time.

Canadian canoes are operated by a pair of rowers sitting in a line and moving in tandem, but if their movements weren't synchronized properly, they could row forever and never get anywhere. What that meant was that Satoru and I, partnered by lottery, were the worst imaginable pair.

"Man, why is that pair so different from us?"

From our perspective, Maria and Mamoru were in perfect harmony. Even though we had only a two-hour lecture on how to operate the canoe the day before, they looked like they had been

partners for years. Not only that, but Mamoru had enough spare time to entertain Maria with rainbows he made out of the spray from the boat's wake.

"Watch them carefully. Mamoru is matching his speed with Maria. Since the person in front can't see what's going on behind them, it's up to the second person to adapt to the first."

"But Maria is actually rowing properly. You just keep looking at the scenery and forget to row at all," Satoru continued to grumble false accusations.

The early summer breeze flowing down the wide expanse of the river felt wonderfully cool. I stop paddling for just a little while and take off my hat, letting the wind tease my hair. The towel around my shoulders waved like a cape, exposing the back of my sweaty T-shirt for the wind to dry. The rubber life vest was torturous to wear, but a necessary precaution.

All along the riverbanks were clumps of reeds, and the chirps of the great reed warbler could be heard coming from within.

Suddenly, I felt the canoe gather speed and glide forward smoothly. For a second I thought Satoru had seen the error of his ways and was rowing the boat with all his strength. But of course that wasn't it.

I looked back and saw that he leaning on the side of the boat, with one hand under his chin and the other trailing in the water.

"What are you doing?" I asked seriously.

He looked up. "The river feels so nice, like the ocean, just without all the salty spray," he said, completely missing my point.

"Weren't you the one who said that we should go as far as we can without relying on our cantus? You've given up already?"

"Don't be silly. We could've done that if we were going downstream, but it's too hard to row against the flow," Satoru yawned.

"That's why we were just offsetting that with our cantus so…"

"If you're going to go to all that trouble, why not just use your cantus to propel the boat in the first place? Anyway, we could always row on the way back."

It was pointless arguing with Satoru when he was already in lazy-mode. I turned my attention back to the scenery. Looking closely at Maria and Mamoru together, and Shun rowing by himself, I could tell that their cantus were doing more than just canceling out the force of the river rushing against them. It seems like it's only human nature to take the easy way out.

Shun waved at us from the riverbank and pointed at the reeds with his paddle. The other two canoes changed course and headed toward him.

"Look, a great reed warbler's nest."

The little nest was built at chest height, so I could see right into it if I stood up in the canoe. The canoe rocked from side to side; Satoru grabbed the sides for balance and peered out at it.

"Woah, it really is. But is it,"

The nest was about seven or eight centimeters in diameter, propped up carefully on three thick reeds. Inside were five small brown-speckled eggs.

"…really a warbler's nest? It could be a haythatcher's, right?"

To be honest, I couldn't, and still can't, tell the difference between the two.

The haythatcher gets its name from the fact that it builds its nest in fields of silver grass, but in reality, it more often makes it out of reeds near riverbanks.

"It's the real thing," Satoru said from his seat. "Haythatchers have to make a lot of nests, plus they don't raise their young, so their nests are always crude-looking. See how this nest is in a place that's hard to see from above? Most haythatcher nests are really exposed."

"Also, you can easily tell from the way the edges of the nest look," Shun added. "Reed warblers stand on the edge to take care of the young, so the edges are flat, whereas haythatchers just leave it the way it is once it's finished, so the edges are pointy. Also, warblers sometimes use their own feathers to make the nest. Needless to say, haythatcher nests won't have any feathers in them."

Since boys often use fake haythatcher eggs to pull pranks on people, it was no wonder they were so knowledgeable about this. Even though none of us had ever been interested in those foul smelling things.

We made a note of where we found the nest along with a simple illustration of it, and continued on our way, keeping an eye out more.

Summer camp wasn't just fun and games. It was part of our placement for science courses, so each team had to do research while at camp, and present it when they got back. Ours was a really vague topic called "Species Around the Tone River". Before we left, we had been having a heated discussion about what exactly we should write about, and had just agreed on a starting point (isn't that enough already?), when Satoru started telling one of his tall tales as an example.

"Blowdogs?" I burst out laughing. "Something that weird couldn't possibly exist."

"I'm telling you, they're real," Satoru said with a completely straight face.

Since Satoru always reacted so defensively to being doubted, we often laughed at the things he said, just to provoke him. We usually only half-believed his stories anyway, but this time, he was being too unbelievable.

"Some people have seen them recently."

"Like who?" Maria asked.

"I don't know their names."

"See, it's the same as always. He always insists there are witnesses, but when you ask for a name, he gets all vague all of a sudden," I said triumphantly, but Satoru ignored me and went on. Why did he get such a kick out of fooling people?

"If you heard his name, you'd probably know who it was. He said that he met a blowdog at the foot of Mt. Tsukuba."

"What did he go all the way to Mt. Tsukuba for?" Maria fell for Satoru's story hook, line, and sinker, forgetting all about the problem of who the witness was.

"A job for the Board of Education, like a survey or something. They obviously don't tell kids all the details. Anyway, when he got close to the mountain, a blowdog came lumbering out of a cave."

Just as I started looking for holes in Satoru's story, Mamoru spoke up.

"What did it look like?"

"It was about the size of a dog, completely black, with a fat torso. Its head was barely half the size of a normal dog's and hung so low that it almost touched the ground."

"Is that really a dog?"

"Who knows, it might not be."

"It doesn't seem particularly dangerous," Maria said.

"Yeah. But if it gets mad, its body swells up like a balloon to warn its enemy to stay away. But if they provoke it even more…!"

"It puffs up bigger and bigger until it explodes, right? Does that really not sound dumb to you?" I cut in, but Satoru switched tactics in an instant.

"But that's the problem."

"Huh?"

"Doesn't it completely defy common sense? If you wanted to fool a bunch of people, you'd come up with something more believable, right?"

A bunch of objections came to mind, but I kept quiet. If I said anything, it would mean that I was accepting his ridiculous story.

Still, it seems like Satoru felt he had got one over me.

"I've heard that blowdogs are messengers from god, but to me they're just normal animals. There are a lot of animals that try to make themselves look bigger when provoked; blowdogs are just an extreme example. When it blows up, the enemy will likely be killed, or at least seriously injured," he said.

Shun, who had been listening silently until now, spoke up. "Still, it sounds unbelievable."

"Why?" Satoru asked sullenly.

"Because if this actually happened, wouldn't blowdogs die before their enemies did? They'd become extinct in no time."

It was a simple but irrefutable point. Satoru crossed his arms and pretended to contemplate the problem, but I was sure he wouldn't be able to come up with anything.

Just when it looked like I was right, he started speaking as if there had never been a break in the conversation.

"…mhm. After he met the blowdog, he also saw an evil minoshiro."

I almost fell out of my seat. "What do you mean 'mhm'? Hello? What happened to the blowdog problem?"

"He backed off when he saw it swelling, so it didn't explode. But who knows, maybe the whole thing about it exploding is fake anyway," Satoru said, trying to slither out of the conversation like a lizard shedding its tail. "And then as he was climbing up Mt. Tsukuba, he encountered an evil minoshiro," he opened his eyes wide in a show of surprise.

"Is that the same as a false minoshiro?" Mamoru asked.

"Yeah, at first glance it looks like a minoshiro, but if you look carefully, they're completely different."

"But why is it evil?" Maria asked, frowning.

"People who meet an evil minoshiro die before long."

How absurd.

"So how did that guy die? He didn't, right?"

"He probably will soon," Satoru said, not batting an eyelid.

If we just left it here, it would be like every other time Satoru told one of his pointless stories. But Shun made a surprising proposal.

"Why don't we do this for our summer camp report?"

"The evil minoshiro?" I was surprised.

"That, blowdogs, and other creatures. This is a rare opportunity, so I want to find out whether they exist or not."

"That sounds interesting," Maria and them agreed immediately.

"Wait, guys, do you even know what you're saying? If you meet an evil minoshiro, you'll die."

As expected, Satoru was trying his hardest to dissuade us from this idea, in fear that his lies would be exposed.

"No one's going to die," Maria snickered.

"But how are you going to catch one? I forgot to mention, but cantus doesn't work on them."

"What do you mean?"

Who knows what he was saying out of desperation. We all turned to look at him.

"Um, I'm not too sure."

"Explain it anyway."

"…"

In the end, Satoru surrendered to our volley of questions. So our camp research topic was decided.

But thinking rationally, there's no way that you'd be able to find so many rare animals. So we decided to keep the originally vague theme, "Species Around the Tone River", so that in the case we couldn't find anything, we could write about normal minoshiro, haythatchers, and stuff like that.

Let's return to the summer camp. Not ten minutes after finding the warbler's nest, I let out a little shout.

"Look! There's a huge nest over there."

For some reason, Shun raised his eyebrows doubtfully. "It looks like a yellow bittern's."

"Yeah. One that big probably is," Satoru agreed.

It was rare that they had the same opinion, which somehow made this more believable.

"But it's pretty crudely built."

The three canoes converged around the nest. It sat a lot lower than the warbler's nest, but was quite exposed in some areas. Any animal with sharp vision would be able to see it from the opposite bank.

Shun half-rose off his seat and peeked into the nest. "There are five eggs."

My heart sped up momentarily when my bare shoulder brushed Shun's as our boats stopped side by side. I pretended to study the eggs and nest carefully. Yellow bitterns are the smallest in the heron family, but still far bigger than the sparrow-sized warbler. Its nest was almost twice as big around, and the eggs were like bluish miniature chicken eggs.

Shun plucked an egg out of the nest and stared at it carefully. His jaw dropped.

"Woah, that's surprising. Even though I half-expected it."

"What?"

"Saki, hold it."

He picked up the egg between two slender fingers and dropped it in the palm of my hand. It felt pleasantly cool, like ceramic.

"What's wrong with it?"

"You don't get it?" He picked up another egg and tossed it at Satoru.

I was surprised at how roughly he was treating them. "Wait, what are you doing? Those poor chicks."

"Ahh," Shun smiled slightly. "They're fake. Look closely."

He picked out another one and put it on top of a nearby rock. Before I could blink, he smashed it with a paddle.

The shell fractured, revealing no white or yolk, but a black, fetid clump. Even more surprising, an antler-like structure started sprouting out of it, branching off in all directions.

"What is that?"

"'Devil's Hand'. You've heard of it, right?"

Actually I hadn't. I pinched a spike with the tip of my finger; it felt as thin as paper.

"Be careful, the edges are really sharp."

The Devil's Hand had veins coming from its core that gave it elasticity. And as Shun said, it was sharp, with barbs poking out along the edges.

"It's usually folded up inside the egg, but when it shell is broken it comes bursting out."

"Why?"

Satoru answered from behind me, "If a rat snake or rosary snake eats it, the egg will explode it its stomach. And when it tries to cough it back up, the barbs will just dig deeper into the stomach and eventually tear it open. Then the poison inside the black smelly part will leak into the snake's body."

How gruesome. Rosary snakes have evolved to eat eggs exclusively, raiding nests and eating all the eggs at once, digesting them later on. Their name comes from the way they look after they have gorged themselves on eggs. If one managed to eat multiple fake eggs, I can only imagine how terrible the aftermath would be.

The eggs did not bring life, but certain death.

I took out my notebook and made a quick sketch of the fake egg.

"There are a lot of fake warbler eggs in Pinewind, but this is the first time I've seen a fake bittern egg," Satoru said wonderingly, holding the fake egg up to the sun.

"To lay an egg of this size, the bird must be pretty big, right?"

"Nope. It's the same size as a haythatcher," Shun said.

"How do you know?" Satoru looked at him.

Shun jerked his chin at something in front of us. What we saw surprised us.

There was a tiny face peeking out at us from the thicket of reeds. It looked just like a heron's, with a beak-full of dried grass. But its eyes were red and lidless; scales covered its face, and the black lines running from the corner of its eyes made it obvious that it was not a bird.

The haythatcher slowly unwound itself, slithering up a thick stalk. Most haythatchers are a blackish or greenish brown, but this one was light green, like a young sprout. Although its beak was

almost identical to a bird's, you could tell that the rest of it had not changed much from its predecessor, the yellow snake.

It was building a new nest, deftly inserting the reeds in its mouth into various places around the nest. The bittern's nest was built twined around the stalks of the reeds, but the haythatcher's nest was more like a warbler's. It looked similar enough to be deceiving.

"The fake egg might have been the haythatchers, since they have a habit of building multiple nests in the same area."

I looked around at Satoru and saw him putting the fake eggs into his backpack. There was only one left in the nest.

"What are you going to do with those?" Maria asked.

"Just in case we don't run into a blowdog or an evil minoshiro, we can write about these for our camp report. Fake eggs that look like bittern eggs are pretty rare."

"But would taking them be bad for the haythatcher?"

"Since they're fake, leaving one should be enough. As long as the nest isn't empty, it should be okay."

Satoru's theory sounded okay, but if that really were the case, then wouldn't the haythatcher only lay one egg to begin with?

At any rate, I thought the snake with the curious face was more cunning than we gave it credit for.

The haythatcher's strategy for survival was brood parasitism.

Brood parasitism involves the parasitic parent laying its eggs in another animal's nest. The egg hatches quickly, and the animal pushes the original eggs out of the nest. To me, this is probably the cruelest thing animals do in order to survive. In Africa, there is a kind of bird called the honeyguide, whose chicks are born with hooks on their beaks in order to kill the chicks in the host nest.

According to *The Natural History of the New Japan Islands*, a thousand years ago, there were only a few species of cuckoos that were brood parasites. But now, just within the area we were in, even though there are animals that actually tended to their own young, even more are looking for a good nest to invade. The world of birds is one of never ending struggle.

The haythatcher sets up its convincing fake nest and eggs, and waits for birds to fall into its trap. It periodically patrols its nests, looking for new tributes.

I thought back to the model of the haythatcher skeleton I one saw in our science class. In order to crush eggs, its precaudal vertebrae are thicker than to other snakes', almost like a row of molars. It reuses the crushed eggshells as material for its own eggs. Because of the large amounts of calcium in its body, the eggs it lays are hard, like bird eggs, so baby haythatchers need beaks in order to break out.

But I never knew it used the Devil's Hand as a defense against rat snakes and rosary snakes until today. Maybe I was asleep when the teacher taught us that.

This may be made up in hindsight, but I seem to remember feeling slightly uncomfortable at that time. It was a real-life example of the adaptation and natural selection mentioned in the textbook. In order to survive, even something like the Devil's Hand could be evolved.

But as we set off up the Tone River again, all my questions and misgivings were blown away by the relaxing breeze.

As the day drew to an end, we steered our canoes toward the bank and went ashore. There were still faint traces of the team before us left on the sand.

The first task was to set up the tents. We dug holes for the bamboo tent poles, and tied the canvas to them with leather strips. It was surprisingly tiring work. The easiest way was to have one person float the poles and canvas, and another person position them properly.

Next was food preparation. We had over three hundred kilos of supplies in our canoes, so food was plentiful. We gathered dried twigs and kindling nearby and lit a fire with our cantus. In a pot, we put purified water, rice, vegetables, meat, tofu skin and other foods to make rice gruel. Even though the only seasonings we had were miso and salt, everyone had worked up an appetite and we devoured the whole pot in the blink of an eye.

The sun had set while we were eating, and now we sat chatting around the campfire.

That scene is still burned vividly into my mind. I was tired after a whole day of activity and smoke from the fire was making my eyes water. Since this was our first big adventure outside the Holy Barrier, we were all more spirited than usual. As the sky faded from pale to deep blue, the fire lit up our faces with a red glow.

To tell the truth, I can't remember the first half our conversations. I remember our daytime conversations perfectly well, but the more interesting topics we discussed that night continue to elude me. It's as if those memories had been washed away.

At the time, I was wholly concentrated on the boy on the other side of the fire.

"…you've never seen it before, right Saki?" Satoru said all of a sudden.

What was he talking about that I've never seen before? Anyway, I'll just give some noncommittal answer.

"Oh, who knows?"

"Huh? So you have?"

I didn't have any choice but to shake my head.

"See, there's no way," Satoru said assertively.

I wanted to refute him, but since I didn't know what he was talking about, there was nothing I could do.

"That…that's it!" Satoru suddenly became very excited for some reason. "Just the other day, Shun and I saw it for the first time, right?"

Across the flames, I saw Shun nod. I couldn't remember when the two of them had become so close.

"It must be something important, to be so heavily guarded."

"Seems like it. Anyway, I don't think any of us happened to see it when we were at Harmony School," Shun said in his calm voice, smiling slightly. "There's a wall right behind the door, so even if you open it, you still can't see the inner courtyard. And the teachers are always really careful about opening and closing the door."

Does this mean they actually went into the courtyard? I was surprised at their daring. The inner courtyard was a square surrounded by buildings on all sides, like the one in Harmony School, and while students were not explicitly forbidden to enter, there were no windows looking into it and people usually don't get the urge to enter anyway.

"But twice I happened to get a glance while the Sun Prince was opening the door. And the image of bolts on the inside is burned into my mind."

What would locks look like a thousand years from now? I can't imagine. They used to just be pieces of metal with notches on them, and gradually became as sophisticated as the gears of a watch. But in our time, there are very few places that need locks, so their designs have become increasingly simple again.

On the inside of the door were a dozen small bolts, arranged radially. You couldn't see where they were from the outside, so the only way to unlock the door was to have a picture with all the locations drawn on it or recall it from memory, and unlock them with your cantus.

"…and then, I kept an eye out while Shun unbolted the door. We slipped inside and shut the door. Holding our breaths, we went toward the second wall," Satoru paused for dramatic effect, looking around at us.

"What was there?" asked Maria.

"Guess," Satoru smiled.

"Not more graves like in the courtyard at Harmony School?" I said.

Mamoru's eyes went wide, not having heard that story before. "What? There are graves there?"

"No, it was just a story I heard."

"Stop trying to be all mysterious already. What was there?"

"…pretty much the same as what I saw at Harmony School," Shun answered. "There are some plants, but most of the courtyard is empty. At the far end is a row of five brick storerooms with heavy wooden doors."

"Did you look inside?" Maria asked.

"We were going to, but turned back," Satoru said.

"Why?"

"There was a really gross smell coming from them, so we didn't want to open them."

Since Satoru was always telling really exaggerated stories with tons of superfluous detail, hearing him say something vague like this actually made us more interested.

"What gross smell?"

"It's a really sharp smell…kind of like ammonia."

"So you mean they were all toilets?"

Satoru didn't respond to my joke.

"Not just that. I'm not exactly sure, but I thought I could hear voices coming from them too," Shun said.

"What kind of voices?" I asked, even though I was getting scared.

"I don't know, but they sounded like animal cries to me."

This had to be a story they made up to scare us. But even as I thought that, a chill ran up my spine. We didn't talk about it for the rest of the night.

Since we had to get up early the next day, we should have gone to sleep, but we all wanted a bit more adventure. Out of the blue, Mamoru suggested that we go night-canoeing. Maria agreed at once.

At first, I was a little apprehensive about rowing down the river with only starlight to guide us. It was an instinctive fear of not being able to see what was around me.

But it would be even worse to be the only one left behind, so I decided to join. We drew straws to see who had to stay behind to watch the fire, because if it went out, we would be lost in the darkness.

I forgot to mention that we had named our canoes. Mine and Satoru's was Sakuramasu 2, Maria and Mamoru's was Hakuren 4, and Shun's was Kamuruchi 7. We marked the sticks for lots with the sharp end of an acorn and drew. Shun and I were in Hakuren 4 and Maria and Mamoru were in Sakuramasu 2. Unfortunately for him, Satoru was left to perform guard duty.

"This is bull," Satoru complained, not knowing when to give up. He always said that the last of the lot was the luckiest, and this is what he gets for it. "You could see the different one if you looked into the can!"

"Sure, but no one looked," Maria replied calmly.

In reality there was no need to peek at the bottom. If you paid attention, you could tell that the marked and unmarked sticks stood up a little differently.

Satoru sat down next to the fire grumpily as we left the camp.

"Don't look at the fire," Shun said.

"Why?"

"No one ever told you? That's the number one rule to night canoeing. You have to get your eyes adjusted to the dark as soon as possible or you won't be able to see anything."

Shun got into the canoe first and turned around to pull me in. My heart soared and I forgot all about being scared of being lost on the dark river.

The canoe slid silently into the night.

Not being able to see anything made us wary of using our cantus, so we rowed with the paddles for a while.

Even after my eyes adjusted, it was hard to see. The river reflected only the flickering lights from stars, and everything else was blackness. The only sound came from the small splashes of our oars.

"It feels like I'm in a dream," I whispered. "Like this, it's hard to know how fast we're going."

"You can tell if you put your hand in the water," Shun said from behind.

I put down the paddle and slipped my fingers into the water. The water flowed swiftly through my fingers.

From somewhere far up ahead, Maria's laughter came echoing back. Because of the silence of the night, or the stillness of the water, sound traveled much farther than it did during the day.

Shun stopped rowing and brought the paddle back into the boat.

"What happened?"

"If you keep rowing, there's always going to be ripples, right…?" He seemed to be looking at the water.

I turned around and saw the campfire. We had traveled quite a distance downriver already.

"Yeah, but it's a river, so there will always be some waves."

Shun chanted his mantra. "Ready? I'm going to flatten the surface."

A ripple spread out from our boat, and the waves disappeared.

"Wow, that's amazing."

It was as if the water had been frozen over. Any imperfection was been smoothed out and the surface looked like polished glass, a giant mirror reflecting every star in the sky.

"Beautiful. It's like I'm in space."

I would remember this night until the day I died.

Hakuren 4 floated not on a river, but the Milky Way.

A voice came traveling on the wind, from far away. Satoru's voice. I looked back and could barely see the fire.

"Should we head back?" Shun asked.

I shook my head silently.

I wanted to stay here for just a little longer. With Shun, in this perfect world.

Our canoe drifted through the starry sky. I leaned back on my right hand to enjoy the view.

After a while, I felt Shun's hand, his slender fingers covering my own.

I wished time would stop. Just Shun and I, linked together like this forever.

I don't know how long we stayed like this. What brought me back to reality was Satoru's voice coming from far away. It seemed like he was panicking because no one was coming back.

"Let's go," Shun said.

This time, I nodded. It would be mean to leave Satoru all by himself for too long.

We swung the boat around. Shun used his cantus to propel us back up the river, and the stars scattered into the waves.

Just as we were hitting a comfortable speed, I was blinded by a feeling of uneasiness.

Exactly how fast were we going right now?

The river and its banks melted into the darkness, leaving me completely unable to recognize anything.

In a situation where our senses fail, even having the god-like powers of cantus couldn't dispel our uneasiness.

Then, a thought came to me.

If we were to shut ourselves off from our senses, would we still be able to use our cantus?

Then, following that.

Why was it that there was nobody who had lost their sense of sight or hearing living in our town?

6

The Natural History of the New Japan Islands writes that over the years, a number of historians, biologists, and linguists have puzzled over the etymology of the name "minoshiro", and come up with a few interesting theories.*

An old accepted explanation was that its name came from the fact that looked like it was wearing a raincoat. But the book doesn't say what kind of raincoat, and I've never seen one before, so I have no idea whether this explanation is accurate or not.

Another reason came partly from the cape-clad appearance, and partly from its white color, combined with the belief that the souls of the dead lived within it. Also, the fact that the minoshiro is usually terrestrial, but returns to the sea to lay eggs was a plausible origin for its name. A later explanation was that the red and yellow eggs that it laid in clumps of seaweed or coral resembled ornaments in the palace of the Dragon King.

Another unofficial reason came from the fact that the when it faced an enemy, the minoshiro's tail will bristle and stand straight up, like a shachihoko found on the roofs of castles in the ancient past. They named it after the castle in Mino, but later research showed that it was Nagoya Castle that had shachihoko, which was in the neighboring province of Owari. After that discovery, the explanation lost its appeal.

There are also numerous stories saying that "shiro" is the name Shirou shortened. Since Shirou was just over a meter tall, he was called Minoshirou ("mino" is three times the length of a standard-width cloth, around 108 centimeters). A different story said that once he met a snake-like creature

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* The cape-clad appearance comes from the kanji 蓑代衣 (minoshirogoromo) meaning 'straw cape'
The kanji is 蓑白 (minoshiro), 'straw cape' plus 'white', which turned into 霊の代 (minoshiro) 'soul's substitute'
The kanji is 海の社 (minoshiro), which means 'shrine of the ocean'
Snake can also be written 巳 (mi), so Minoshirou would mean 'Shirou of the snake', probably referring to Orochi
The sea slug has the same 蓑 (mino) as the minoshiro, meaning 'straw cape'

with numerous tentacles, which also gave him the name Minoshirou. The stories are varied and hard to get a grasp on.

Still on the topic of Shirou, one old folktale says that he was cursed by a white snake and turned into a minoshiro. Since other details of the story were lost, there is no way to prove its authenticity.

Personally, I think any of the stories are possible. At least it is much easier to understand compared to the etymology of the name of the toads that are everywhere on Mt. Tsukuba. In the book it says, "It uses powers to draw in and devour insects". Who would believe the idea that toads have cantus?

Another mystery surrounding minoshiro is that it's not mentioned in most ancient texts. Even though many of the texts from over a thousand years ago are off-limits, the word "minoshiro" is still nowhere to be found in available texts. That means that minoshiro were discovered within the past couple hundred years, but an entirely new creature evolving within such a short timespan is unthinkable.

Actually it's not just minoshiro. In the years between civilization from a thousand years ago and today, there was a mass extinction of fauna. That past species all went extinct is unusual but not completely unexpected, what was surprising was the sudden appearance of minoshiro and hundreds of other species as if they had come out of thin air.

One hypothesis that seeks to explain this phenomenon has been garnering attention lately. It says that their evolution was driven by the collective human unconscious.

But that seems a bit extreme. Just recently, it was determined that minoshiro descended directly from a species of sea slug called the indica nudibranch that lives around the Boso region. Although it's hard to imagine a 30-centimeter long sea slug evolving into something as big as a minoshiro, when you look at the cape-like protruding gills you have to admit that there is a definite resemblance. If the sea slug is really the ancestor of the minoshiro, and they share the same name, then that is supporting evidence for the first two theories that were mentioned earlier. But I think more research is still needed.

The reason I'm mentioning all this is that in order to understand what I'm talking about when I get to the part about meeting the false minoshiro during summer camp, you need to know what a real minoshiro is.

Since minoshiro didn't exist a thousand years ago, it's possible that they might not exist a thousand years from now. So even though there is already literature on minoshiro, I still want to explain it again here.

Their length ranges from tens of centimeters to one meter, the smallest are about the size of a hornworm, while the big ones are as long as a millipede. They have a big Y shaped antenna on their head, and two smaller pairs of feelers on the end of them. Their eyes are small and covered by skin, so it is assumed that they can only detect light and darkness. Minoshiro have short legs like a hornworm's or millipede's (this feature makes them unlike gastropods such as the sea slug), and can walk at a good speed. The movement of their numerous legs is reminiscent of a military march. There are colored, half-transparent quills on their back that glow at the tips.

Minoshiro are omnivores and mainly eat moss, lichen, fungus, various insects, and seeds. They are unaffected by poisons, separating it out of their food and storing it in their bodies. Because of

this, minoshiro indirectly cleanse the soil. Their bodies also change colors depending on what they have recently eaten. This can be seen most obviously after a meal of mosses, when they turn bright green. This trait is also seen in sea slugs after eating sea anemones.

When a minoshiro is threatened, it will raise and rattle the quills on its back to intimidate predators. If the predator continues to advance, it will get hit with the quills, which are full of deadly venom. Something worth mentioning is that they never threaten humans in this way.

The minoshiro species includes giant minoshiro (a rare type with body length above two meters and covered in silver bristles), red minoshiro (with half-transparent red bodies), blue minoshiro (with blue-tipped feelers), rainbow minoshiro (covered in fine hairs similar to the powdery scales on a butterfly, and reflect light like jewel beetles), and various subspecies.

Their size and extremely unpleasant taste due to the poison in their bodies mean that minoshiro have almost no natural enemies. Their only predator is the tiger crab, which lurks under sandy beaches. Most cases of minoshiro being hunted by tiger crabs seem to occur around the time they make their annual migration to the beach in order to lay eggs.

Just to be completely clear, let me give a brief introduction about tiger crabs. They are ferocious carnivores descended from the swimming crab, with sharp, diamond-shaped shells forty-five to a hundred-twenty centimeters wide, colored to blend in with the sand, large pincers, three spikes on their heads, and serrated edges on the front of their shells. Their back legs are useful for swimming as well as for burrowing into the sand. Tiger crabs are capable of jumping up to two meters straight up out of the sand in order to catch their prey. They are common around Hasaki beach, but can also be found in meadows, forests, and mountains. They eat everything from frogs, lizards, snakes, and small mammals to sea birds, beached dolphins, whales and other sea creatures. Their heavy shells are nearly impenetrable, though when tiger crabs meet, they often fight to the death, and cannibalism is common. Despite their vicious nature, they are not considered a threat to humans.

It is said that minoshiro can autotomize parts of their bodies to escape from tiger crabs, as well as do other interesting things that I've not yet seen.

As for the first part, I have seen it before, quite unexpectedly. It was during early summer the year before we graduated from Harmony School.

"Saki, look over there!" Maria called quietly.

"What is it?"

We were on a little clearing hidden by thickets overlooking the beach. The two of us often went there after class if the weather was good.

"A minoshiro got caught by a tiger crab…"

I stuck my head out over the bushes and caught a whiff of the salt air. The beach was deserted. Looking at where Maria was pointing, I saw a single minoshiro on the sand about twenty or thirty meters away from the ocean. It was writhing as if it wanted to go toward the water but was being rooted to the spot.

Looking carefully, we saw that its legs were clamped between dark green pincers.

"We have to help it," I jumped up, but Maria pulled me back down.

"What are you doing, stupid! What if someone sees you?"

"There's no one here."

"You don't know when someone will, right? That's the spot where the boys go fishing."

Admittedly, running naked across the beach wasn't something you normally do, so we threw on our clothes and dashed down the hill. As we approached, the camouflaged body of the tiger crab revealed itself. It had the minoshiro's legs in one pincer, quills in the other, and was looking at it as if contemplating how it should go about eating it.

I faltered. Even though it was just a crab, tiger crabs were known to take on grown bears and kill them. It was said that they don't attack humans, but for a two kids without their cantus yet, it was still impossible for us to do anything.

Until then, I hadn't prayed that someone would show up to help us. Dear god, if not Shun, then at least Satoru…

"What now? We could try throwing sand at it?"

I was about to have a nervous breakdown, but Maria was appraising the situation calmly.

"Wait. It's okay, it's fighting back now."

The minoshiro started stroking the tiger crab's claws with its feelers as if trying to soothe it. The tiger crab slowly stopped moving, bubbles frothing from its mouth.

All of a sudden three feelers sprouted from the minoshiro's back, and started waving as if gesturing to the tiger crab. The feelers autotomized and fell onto the sand, still wriggling.

The tiger crab remained motionless, still holding onto the minoshiro and foaming at the mouth.

Still writhing in pain, the minoshiro raised two more feelers, waved them jerkily in front of the tiger crab, and let them fall to the ground.

Now there were five feelers wriggling on the sand. The tiger crab made no response, and the minoshiro went still.

About half a minute later, the minoshiro started moving again, but this with hostility.

With its free quills it started hitting the tiger crab's shell. Once, twice, three times. The fourth time, it lifted one single venomous quill, stiffened it with all its strength, and autotomized it. It hit the tiger crab's pincers as it fell.

The tiger crab loosened its grip. The minoshiro extracted itself and made a beeline for the open water.

Ignoring the minoshiro, the tiger crab picked up two of the feelers on the sand and started eating them.

"Well, it looks like it succeeded," Maria said.

She was smiling, but it looked more like a grimace. Maria didn't really like animals, and in actuality probably didn't care at all about the minoshiro, but pretended she did, for my sake.

"It lost six feelers though, poor thing."

"It's a cheap price to pay for its life though, isn't it? Otherwise it would have been eaten."

When a minoshiro can't escape from a tiger crab, it will drop its feelers as bait, hoping that the tiger crab will let go of them to eat the feelers. There's an interesting phenomenon that occurs here that isn't seen in other animals: bargaining. How many feelers the minoshiro is willing to drop is a function between its physical fitness and how hungry the tiger crab is.

In the case that negotiations turn sour, the minoshiro will start attacking with its quills. The tiger crab can forcibly overpower the minoshiro, but if a quill slips between the gaps in its shell in the process, there's a good chance it will die.

This rational behavior is surprising for two species that aren't particularly intelligent. But for the tiger crab, releasing the minoshiro after it drops its feelers is probably just common sense.

Let's get back to summer camp.

The next morning, we set about making breakfast and rice balls for lunch with our mess kits. Then we took down the tents, filled in the holes from the poles, covered up the traces of our campfire, packed everything back into the canoes and set off.

We traveled down the river through the morning mist, using both our paddles and our cantus. On our left we could hear frequent bird calls, the high, stretched-out cry of the meadow bunting.

The sky was overcast ever since we woke up, which was a shame, but breathing in the fresh morning air drove away any sleepiness I had.

This part of the river was a lot wider than where we were yesterday. The right riverbank was a haze in the distance and often completely obscured by mist.

I thought back to geography class in Harmony School, when we learned about the transition between Lake Kasumigaura and the Tone River.

Two thousand years ago, Lake Kasumigaura was a huge inland sea called Katori Ocean that connected the present day Tone River to the ocean. At that time, the Tone River flowed much farther west into Tokyo Bay.

To avoid the frequent flooding of the Tone River and to increase the land available for agriculture, Tokugawa Ieyasu decided to divert the river. After hundreds of years, the estuary was redirected all the way to Inubousaki. Sand was used to partially fill the Katori Ocean to reduce its size and it became Lake Kasumigaura. (I became interested in Tokugawa Ieyasu after learning that he was able to pull off such a big project, but unfortunately, this story is only instance of him in history and geography textbooks.)

In the thousand years that followed, the Tone River and Lake Kasumigaura became what they are today. First, most of the parts that ran toward Tokyo bay rejoined with the Tone River. It goes without saying that a barren area like Tokyo has no need for water. So, the water level in the Tone rose, and in order to prevent flooding, a canal was constructed to connect it to Lake Kasumigaura. Because of that, the lake expanded to almost its original size. It surpasses Lake Biwa in terms of surface area and is now Japan's largest lake.

And now, since the lower reaches of the river run right by Kamisu 66, we built multiple canals to use the water for transportation. That's why going upstream, and finally emerging at the river proper for the first time is quite exciting.

"Hey, let's go faster," Satoru said.

"Why? Don't you want to look around here?" I asked.

"I'll pass. There aren't any animals here anyway."

"But we're almost at the place we're supposed to be camping at tonight, right?" Mamoru said uncertainly.

"What are you talking about? Have you forgotten the true purpose of this trip? It's to look for the evil minoshiro and blowdogs, yeah? Come on, let's hurry up and cross the inlet and disembark."

"Umm, Sun Prince said that we're not allowed on the far side of the inlet. Getting off there…"

This time, even Maria looked hesitant.

"It'll be fine. We'll just take a quick look around and leave," Satoru said nonchalantly, paddling away.

"What should we do?" I asked Shun, who looked deep in thought.

His answer was not what I expected.

"It would be bad if we were found out. But I kind of want to go see, since I don't think we'll get another chance to come here in the future."

With these words, it was decided. Satoru came up with the sneaky idea of going to our formerly planned camping spot and leaving traces to make it look like we spent a night there.

"That way, when the next team comes along, they'll think we were actually here, right?" he said, sounding pleased with himself.

I've never seen him look nearly as happy after doing something actually worth praising.

We set out across the lake again, going faster than was prudent. A small tern flew above us, challenging us to a race, but Sakuramasu 2 caught up to it in seconds. The bird wheeled around and flew out of sight.

I stretched out at let the breeze flow over me. I took off my hat before the wind blew it away and let my hair fan out behind me. My poncho-towel flapped and fluttered.

Even though I couldn't see anything but water around me, I didn't get tired of the view. The sun glancing out from between the clouds made a dazzling display on the crystal clear water of the lake, and the spray from our boat made miniature rainbows in the air.

I was so into the scenery that it took me a while to notice my vision going weird. Colors started flickering in front of my eyes and I saw afterimages in the corners of my eyes.

Turning around, I saw Satoru staring intently at the surface of the lake. When trying to move something on water, like a boat, you first concentrate on an area in front of the boat, and try to reduce the distance. But after gaining speed, you have to imagine that you're pushing off the water and gliding over it.

Both ways involve a lot of concentration and is tiring to do for a long time. Plus the fact that the boat is constantly moving up and while you're staring at a fixed spot means that it's easy to get seasick.

Satoru noticed my glance and looked relieved. "We've come pretty far, do you want to switch with me?"

I shook my head slowly, "I don't think I can."

"What do you mean you can't?" Satoru said, sounding slightly angry.

"My eyes are all weird, I think I stared at the reflections for too long," I explained.

Satoru stared disbelievingly at me, then reluctantly said, "I guess we can't help it then. I'll have to propel the canoe the whole way."

I apologized to him, then remembered that I had a pair of sunglasses in my backpack and put them on. They were from my father, who ordered it specially from an artisan. It was made of high

quality glass with a special mix of madder and persimmon dye that blocked the sun's rays. I should've worn them right from the beginning.

Everything turned a shade darker when I put them on, but at least my eyes stopped hurting.

We were forbidden to use our cantus if there were any problems with our eyes. Someone as skilled as Shisei Kaburagi could use his cantus in complete darkness, but beginners like us needed to be able to see what we were doing in order to create the proper images in our mind.

We crossed Lake Kasumigaura within an hour. As we were travelling over the deepest part of the lake, there was a big splash from the reed thickets and a huge shadow appeared in the water, vanishing in the next instant. It had a sort of diamond shape to it, so it was probably a tiger crab. Since we were nowhere near the shore at that time, I realized that tiger crabs must be better swimmers than I had originally thought.

Behind the reeds, we could see the deep forest and the green river running from it. We looked it up before coming here, and learned that the river was called Sakura River. Mt. Tsukuba should be right in front of us, but it was hidden by the tall trees.

Partway up, the river branched in two. We weren't sure which way to go, so we chose the left branch because it was flowing more rapidly. About a kilometer later, the dense trees opened up and we saw Mt. Tsukuba ahead of us. The Sakura River wended northward from the west side of the mountain.

If we kept following the river, we'd end up too far away from Mt. Tsukuba, so we disembarked here.

"Yes! We made it," Shun said, stepping off first.

I went next, followed by Maria, Mamoru, and lastly Satoru, looking exhausted from propelling the canoe the whole way himself. He went off into the bushes and we heard him throwing up. I felt a pang of guilt in my chest.

We hid the canoes among the reeds. Having come this far, it was unlikely that anyone would spot us, but we did it just in case. And to prevent them from floating away, we anchored them deeply in the mud.

"So what now? It'll be lunchtime soon," Mamoru said, looking hopefully at us.

"Let's first go up the mountain and take a look around. Bring only light things that you need, and we can eat lunch when we get up there."

Since Satoru was still groggy, Shun volunteered to be the leader. We usually complain when Satoru takes control, but everyone was willing to follow Shun. So we shouldered our backpacks and set off up the mountain.

The pathless climb was harder than we expected. Whoever was at the front used their cantus to clear away the ivy and brush, but it was so tiring that they had to switch every five minutes.

On top of that there was an astounding number of bush mosquitos, black flies, and other bloodsucking insects swarming around us. These insects can't enter the Holy Barrier, which is why there were so many out here. Even though we kept killing them, they never stopped coming. We had to use our cantus continuously, which burns a lot of energy. And because my sunglasses made it hard for me to see the smaller bugs, I was even more tired.

That's why when a strange abandoned building suddenly appeared in front of us, we were all dumbstruck.

"What is that?" Maria asked, sounding spooked.

It wasn't unreasonable. The building was about the size of Kamisu's public hall, covered so thickly in ivy and lichen that it looked like a slumbering creature that had grown out of the forest itself.

"…it's probably Mt. Tsukuba's shrine," Satoru said, perusing an old map he had brought.

Although he wasn't completely back to normal, Satoru had more or less recovered his energy after being back on solid ground.

"A shrine?" I asked, holding back a shriek as I accidentally trod on a toad. There were nasty animals creeping all over the mountain.

"It has a history of at least two or three thousand years. This building too, was probably already considered really old a thousand years ago," Shun added.

"Should we eat here?" Mamoru asked.

Everyone was undoubtedly hungry, but the prospect of eating lunch here was unappealing.

Just as I was about to object, a blood-curdling scream came from my left. Someone else must have stepped on a toad too, I thought. But when I looked, I saw Satoru standing there, stiff as a board. And when Shun rushed over, he too froze.

"What's wrong?"

I realized that all four of them had become still as statues. No one could answer my question.

What in the world was going on? I was this close to having a panic attack. Then, as I followed their gaze and saw what they had seen, it was my turn to scream.

In front of me was a bizarre creature I had never seen before.

The names evil minoshiro and false minoshiro came to me. The thing definitely resembled a minoshiro at first glance, but was completely different upon closer examination.

It was about fifty or sixty centimeters long, with rubbery skin that stretched and contracted constantly, making parts of its body bulge and shrink amorphously. On its back were clusters of half-transparent spines like a sea urchin's, each glowing brightly with all the colors of the rainbow.

The ever-shifting colors overlapped and mixed, creating shimmering patterns in the air. Even with my sunglasses on, I could feel the beautiful lights numbing my brain.

The false minoshiro slunk slowly toward the shrine, leaving a trail of lights in its wake.

My own scream had awakened something in my mind. I turned toward Shun and Satoru and started shouting at them, "Hurry…Satoru! Shun! Catch it, it's getting away!"

But neither of them moved; they simply stared at the false minoshiro.

I started to use my cantus, but hesitated. Earlier, I said that it was dangerous for multiple people to use their cantus on the same thing. If someone was already focused on a target, it was better for everyone else to not use their cantus, no matter what the situation was.

Both Shun and Satoru's gaze were fixed on the false minoshiro. Usually, this was a sign that they were using their cantus, but in spite of that, both were frozen to the spot.

It felt like an eternity, but in reality only a few seconds passed. The false minoshiro ambled into the tall grass and disappeared under the main building of the shrine.

I couldn't understand why the four of them were still frozen in place, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't even know what had happened in the first place to make them like that. I wanted to shake them awake, but was seized with the irrational fear that if I touched them, they would fall over dead.

The first to be snap out of the trance was, surprisingly, Mamoru.

"…I'm hungry," he said in a small voice, looking around.

"Um, what exactly happened just now?"

Maria, Satoru, and Shun all came to their senses and sank onto the ground. Satoru looked really sick and Shun rubbed his eyes.

"Are we dead?"

Ironically, Maria's question startled us into full awareness.

"That story was probably a lie. Don't worry about it," Satoru said, groaning.

"Probably" made it sound like he was trying to pretend that he wasn't the one who made up the lie in the first place.

"That aside, how come I couldn't move at all?"

"I couldn't either. Why though? Satoru?" Maria wrapped her arms around herself uneasily.

"I dunno. As soon as I saw the lights, my mind went blank, and I couldn't concentrate no matter how hard I tried."

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "It's just like that time, right? Like when we were at the Temple of Purity, looking into the flames of the altar…"

"I get it," Shun said, getting to his feet. "That makes sense then. We were hypnotized."

"What does that mean?"

"It's an ancient technique for controlling people. Through suggestions, you can make them fall asleep, tell the truth, or do whatever you command."

I couldn't imagine where Shun had learned something like this.

"But Saki was fine; she yelled at us to catch it and everything. Maybe she's so thickheaded she's immune."

"No I'm not," I snapped. "It's because I was wearing sunglasses…"

The most simple-minded one out of all of us was definitely Mamoru, but I stopped myself before I said it aloud.

"Hypnosis uses flickering red and blue lights. The red sunglasses probably cut down its effectiveness. Let me see it really quick."

As I wondered where in the world he got all this information from, he put on my sunglasses and stared up into the sky.

"But if Saki's the only one who can use her cantus, it'll be hard to catch that thing. It seems to like to hide in narrow crevices."

"Looks like it. Hey, shouldn't we be heading back soon?" Maria said, uncharacteristically nervous.

"Why don't we go back to the canoes and have lunch?"

I wasn't sure if Mamoru was scared, like always, or just hungry.

Suddenly, I had an idea.

"It's okay! We can catch it."

The four of them looked apprehensive, but as I explained my plan, their doubt gave way to hope and excitement. I couldn't deny that seeing that gave me a rush.

At that time, we had no idea what the larger implications of catching a false minoshiro were.

"Alright, this is great. We got a big one," Satoru said in a satisfied voice, after he had recuperated a bit.

"These guys look like they could be pretty tasty." Mamoru too, sounded a lot more energetic now that he had eaten his lunch.

"You're probably the only person in the world who thinks they look appetizing," Shun looked slightly aghast.

I felt the same way.

Levitating two meters above the ground in front of us were three tiger crabs. Contrary to our expectations, they hung there without struggling, blowing bubbles docilely. All three were a mottled, greenish-brown color, and the biggest crab sported a patch that resembled a map of sorts. The medium sized one had thin stripes on its shell that resembled plant roots and the smallest one had spots of green on it that looked like lichen.

Satoru flipped over the largest crab with his cantus to get a look at its underside. The tiger crab suddenly lashed out when the medium sized crab passed through his field of vision. It made as if to swim through the air and snapped its pincers menacingly.

"Woah. What's its problem?" Satoru said. He grinned nervously, trying to cover up the fact that he had almost run away in fright just now.

We tied up the tiger crabs with some five-leaf vines. It was hard to do it just right so that they could move somewhat freely but still be under our control. Maria tried to loop the ends of vines around the spikes on their shells to make reins, but the crabs were smarter than we expected. They kept turning to create slack in the vines and pulling them off with their claws. In the end, we had to pass the vines through bamboo stems to stop the crabs from tearing at them.

Although it took much more effort than expected, I was satisfied with our result. The sight of the three tiger crabs on the ends of their leashes reminded me of the ancient method of cormorant fishing. We set off looking for the false minoshiro, keeping an eye on the crabs to make sure they don't get too close to each other.

We thought that the crabs would be unhappy about being bound and led around on a leash, but we were wrong. Or if they were unhappy, we couldn't tell; all they did was eat. Everything alive within reach was snatched up and devoured.

At first, we were worried that once they ate their fill, the tiger crabs would stop searching for more food. But instead, they continued forward, dismembering their prey with their sharp claws. The sight of snakes and toads wriggling in pain seemed to put them off, and they moved on after that.

If nothing came of the search after all this, everyone would probably hate me for coming up with such an unpleasant idea.

But barely an hour later, Maria's tiger crab hit the jackpot.

"Looks like it got something again," Maria peeked under the shrine and grimaced. "Seems like something big this time…"

We all cringed when we heard that. The sight of a tiger crab gorging itself on a larger mammal was something no one wanted to see.

"Pull it out and see," Satoru said, turning away.

"Help me."

"You can do it yourself, right? Just use your cantus to pull in the ropes."

"But it's creepy," Maria looked at us imploringly.

I have to confess that I ignored my best friend's plea and pretended to be occupied with my own tiger crab. I was still feeling slightly ill from having seen Satoru's crab disembowel its prey just a while ago.

"I'll do it, then."

Unexpectedly, Mamoru volunteered.

The two of them started pulling the tiger crab out while the rest of us hung back, expecting something unpleasant to appear.

"Look, they got it," Shun said.

Hearing that, we turned our attention to the crab.

"The false minoshiro!" Maria shouted.

I put my sunglasses on just in time.

The tiger crab emerged, holding its prey tightly in both claws.

There was no doubt it was the one that had escaped earlier. Even though the tiger crab was clutching it so fiercely that it looked like it was about be cut in half, it was still struggling with all its strength to escape. When it saw us, all the spikes on its back shot straight up and the tips started glowing.

"Shun! Satoru! Hurry and catch it!" I shouted, then realized I was in the same situation that had occurred earlier.

Apart from me, everyone else was standing as if petrified. They had all fallen to the false minoshiro's hypnotism.

I would have to do it myself then. At least this time I had a powerful ally. One with a primitive brain that was impervious to hypnotism, and a stubborn single-mindedness that never let its prey escape–the ferocious, bubble-blowing tiger crab.

Apart from wearing sunglasses, I also knew not to look at the patterns in the flickering lights, so I remained clear-headed. Through half-open eyes, I started systematically twisting and pulling off the shining spikes.

"Please cease your destructive activity."

An echoing female voice came out of nowhere, startling me.

"Who's there? Where are you?"

"You are destroying public library property. Please cease your destructive activity immediately."

The voice was coming from the false minoshiro.

"That's because you keep trying to hypnotize us."

"The use of defensive light hypnosis by terminal machines is sanctioned under ordinance 488722, item 5. Please cease your destructive activity immediately."

"You stop hypnotizing us, then I'll stop ripping your glowy things out."

"I repeat my warning. Please cease your destructive activity at once," the false minoshiro repeated obstinately.

"I'm warning you too. If you don't stop, I won't either. I'll rip out all those glowing things!"

Surprisingly, the false minoshiro stopped shining. Seems like that simple threat was effective enough.

"Are you guys okay?"

The four of them still looked like they were in a stupor.

"Undo the hypnosis, now! Or else I'm going to start plucking again," I said warningly.

The false minoshiro replied hurriedly, "Effects of light hypnosis wear off in time. The National Institute of Psychiatry's report, number 49463165, states that there are no observable side effects."

"Undo it. Now. Or else…."

I didn't need to finish the sentence. The false minoshiro suddenly let out a piercing noise and I ducked instinctively, covering my ears. The four of them started moving as if waking up from a dream.

I turned slowly back toward the false minoshiro, bursting with questions I wanted to ask it.

"Who are you? What are you?"

"I am the Tsukuba Branch of the National Diet Library."

"A library?"

"If you are inquiring my model and version, I am a Panasonic Automotive Archive, Autonomous Evolution version SE-778H Lambda."

I wasn't sure what that meant, but no matter what sort of monster it was, that was an absurd self-introduction. It was like someone walking up to you on the street and saying, "Hi, My name is National Library", or "I'm a school".

"Are you saying you're actually a library?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes."

I looked over the false minoshiro. Now that it had stopped wriggling and glowing, it definitely looked man-made.

"Where are the books then?"

"All paper based print interfaces have either decomposed, or have been lost through wars or other destructive activity. No remaining existences have been confirmed."

"I don't really get it, but the point is there are no books? So you're just an empty library?"

"All information is archived in 890PB of holographic memory."

I had no idea what it was saying.

"…if you're trying to confuse us with big words, maybe I should just tear out all those feeler looking things."

Making threats wasn't something I was particularly fond of doing.

"The contents of the books are stored inside me, and can be accessed at any time," it replied immediately.

That was better, though I still wasn't completely clear how it worked.

"What kinda books?" Satoru asked conversationally.

"All 38,242,506 volumes published in Japan since 2129 AD and 671,630 reference volumes in English as well as other languages."

The five of us exchanged glances. Kamisu 66′s largest library, in Hayring, had fewer than three thousand books available to the public, and if you included all the books in storage underground, the total amounted to maybe ten thousand. That a body as small as the false minoshiro's could hold over four thousand times that number was a lie not even Satoru would dare to tell.

"Accessed at any time means that you can read them whenever you want?"

"That is correct."

"So if I asked you any question, you'd be able to find the relevant book out of all the ones stored inside you?" I asked doubtfully.

"Yes. The average query time is sixty nanoseconds," boasted the false minoshiro, or rather, the Tsukuba Branch of the National Diet Library.

I didn't know how long sixty nanoseconds were, but I assumed it was something like sixty seconds.

"T-then…I want to ask…!"

I suddenly became really excited. I could get answers to everything I've ever wanted to up til now. Hundreds of questions came to mind all at once. Just as I was about to speak, Satoru interrupted with the most useless question in the world.

"Why are there so many toads around here?"

"Why do you look like that if you're a library?" Maria asked.

Shun looked like he wanted to ask something too, but was too out of it from the hypnosis to form a coherent sentence.

"I…I want to ask," I finally decided what I wanted to know most. "Do fiends really exist? Also, what about karma demons?"

We waited with bated breath. Sixty seconds passed, then two minutes, then three, but the false minoshiro remained silent.

"Hey, why aren't you answering?" Satoru couldn't wait any longer.

"User registration is required to access query services," it said, without a trace of guilt for making us wait for nothing.

"Geez, shouldn't you tell us that first?" Satoru said reproachfully.

"How do we register?"

The false minoshiro ignored Satoru and addressed Maria's question.

"You must be eighteen years or older, and supply proof of name, address, and age with one of the following: driver's license, insurance card (with address), passport (a copy with full date of birth, and current address), student identification (with address and date of birth), certificate of residence (issued within the past three months), or other official identification. All must be within the expiry date."

"Eighteen? But we're…"

"Furthermore, the following forms of identification are not valid: employee identification, student identification (lacking date of birth or address), commuter passes, business cards…"

The false minoshiro was probably talking about some papers that were used way back when. We had a rough idea of what it was talking about because we had learned a little bit about the strange age in which pieces of paper were more important than the people themselves.

"What if we don't have any of those things?" I asked.

"If user registration is not completed, query services will be unavailable," the false minoshiro said in the same placid voice.

"Guess it can't be helped it. I'll just have to tear you apart bit by bit to get to the books inside you."

"Destructive activity is a criminal offense punishable by law."

"What should we do? Start by pulling the feelers out, then cutting it in half?" I said to Satoru, miming a ripping action.

"Hmm, look at how rubbery its skin is. We should probably skin in first," Satoru leered, catching on to my plan.

"…documentation requirements have been waived. Beginning user registration process!" it said loudly, still in the same soothing female voice. "Will each user please pronounce their name clearly."

Each of us stepped in front of the false minoshiro in turn and said our names.

"Iris pattern, voice print, and head MRI authentication complete. User registration complete. Shun Aonuma, Maria Akizuki, Satoru Asahina, Mamoru Itou, Saki Watanabe, query services are available for three years starting today."

"Alright then, why are there so many toads…"

Shun covered Satoru's mouth with his right hand. "There are a mountain of questions we could ask, but I want to hear the answer to Saki's first. …do fiends really exist? What about karma demons?"

The false minoshiro didn't pause for a second this time. "The term 'fiend' returned 671,441 hits in the database, and can be roughly separated into two groups. ①Creatures that have reportedly been sighted in the ancient past, frequently called demons, ghosts, ghouls and other similar names, that do not exist in reality. ②A term invented in the final years of the ancient civilization to describe those suffering from Raman-Klogius syndrome, also known as 'Fox in the Henhouse' syndrome. It is not confirmed to exist in the present, but did in the past, and is highly likely to recur in the future."

We looked at each other. We couldn't fully understand what it was saying, but we could tell that it was something we would never be taught, and something we were definitely not allowed to know.

"Karma demons were also discovered before the fall of the ancient empire, and was a common term for severe cases of Hashimoto-Appelbaum syndrome. Along with fiends, their existence in the present in unconfirmed, but there is a high risk of reappearance."

"That…" Shun hesitated.

I saw his face pale and understood painfully well what he was thinking.

We shouldn't ask any more than this. The warning came unconsciously.

But opening Pandora's box when we knew perfectly well not to has been human nature since the dawn of time.

7

"…in the year 2011 of the Gregorian calendar, scientists conclusively documented the existence of psychokinesis, which until that point had always been a considered an occult phenomenon," the false minoshiro explained dispassionately.

Its voice gave off the impression of a cultured, intelligent woman, and although it was a mesmerizing voice, it sounded almost too perfect, and thus inhuman.

"Before that, whether it was in public or in laboratories, all PK experiments were complete failures. However, in the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2011, cognitive scientist Imran Ismailov conducted successful experiments in the capital city of Baku. In quantum mechanics, there is a well-known paradox of an observed particle affecting another particle, but Ismailov was the first to predict that the microscopic world being magnified to a macroscopic event applied to PK as well. Those doubtful of the success of Ismailov's experiments were recruited to act as observers with the latent ability to resist PK. After going through several trials, they were subdivided into various groups so that no observer knew the entire scope of the experiment. These observers were then asked to conceal certain facts from someone who knew of Ismailov's experiment design. There were multiple control factors…"

The five of us listened entranced to the false minoshiro's lengthy speech. Even though we couldn't even understand a fraction of what it was talking about, we drank up its words like plants after a drought.

Until now, our knowledge of the world was like a jigsaw puzzle missing the most important piece. The false minoshiro's words were giving us the missing piece, slaking our curiosity.

But we never imagined that we would be hearing about a story so hellish that it would leave our hair standing on end.

"…the first person Ismailov discovered with extrasensory perception, Nona Mardanova, was a nineteen-year-old girl. All she was able to do was move a light plastic ball sealed within a transparent tube, but like a seed crystal that prompts a chemical solution to nucleate, she was the catalyst that awakened mankind's latent power."

Unawares, Maria had come up next to me and was clasping my hand tightly. How did humans come to wield such a god-like power? The story of its origin was always vaguely glossed over in history textbooks.

"…the number of PK users grew rapidly and eventually reached 0.3 percent of the entire population. In the ensuing years of societal disorder, further statistical data was lost. However, a rise in the percentage of people diagnosed with schizoid personality was documented.

"Only 0.3 percent?" Satoru muttered doubtfully.

I couldn't believe it either. What had happened to the remaining 99.7 percent of the population?

"What do you mean by societal disorder?" Maria asked.

"In the beginning, ordinary people ostracized PK users. Even though they only had weak abilities, it was more than enough to potentially destroy the social order of that time, and PK users kept that fact well hidden. For Japan, this destruction began with the Boy A incident."

"Boy A? Is that his name?" Mamoru's brows furrowed.

"At that time, it was common practice to withhold the names of minors involved in criminal activities, so a codename was assigned."

"What did he do?" I asked.

At the worst, I expected the answer to be that he had committed robbery or something like that.

"A's powers were rudimentary, but one day he realized that he could open any lock he came across. Using this ability, he repeatedly broke into homes in the middle of the night, raped nineteen women in their sleep, and killed seventeen of them."

We were frozen with shock. I couldn't believe what I had heard. Rape. And murder. …killing people.

"Wait a sec! That's impossible! Because wasn't A human? A human killed another human?" Satoru asked hoarsely.

"Yes. Following A's arrest, the number of crimes involving PK increased, but most went unsolved often because common methods of surveillance were rendered useless with PK. Normal people began attacking PK users as a whole, beginning with personal harassment and elevating to public abuse that nearly ended in executions. In defense, PK users formed their own factions and the most zealous of them proposed establishing a PK-exclusive society. Indiscriminate terrorism by PK users followed. The resulting political, ethical, and philosophical conflicts plunged the world into an age of violent discord. Without previous experience in this situation, there appeared to be no end to this world war."

I turned mutely to look at the others. Fear had wiped all other emotions from their faces. Mamoru was cowering on the ground with both hands over his ears.

"…country with the greatest military power, America, started a civil war in order to eradicate all PK users. Using electric shocks to distinguish between normal people and PK users, and the wide-spread availability of guns, the population of PK users in North America dropped from 0.3 to 0.0004 percent in a short amount of time."

Satoru kept shaking his head, whispering, "This can't be true."

"…on the other hand, the scientific superpower, India, successfully differentiated the DNA of normal people and PK users, was researching methods for controlling peoples' genes. Unfortunately, their search was unsuccessful, but the data garnered were found to be useful later on."

As if in a dream, I gazed at the animal-machine caught between the pincers of the tiger crab. Could it actually be a demon sent from hell? It would lead us astray with its strange words, and eventually make us go insane.

"…ironically, because their lives were continually being threatened, the surviving PK users' abilities evolved rapidly. At first, PK was thought to be the projection of energy from the breakdown of sugar in the brain. Because of that, it should have been naturally limited to the amount of sugar in the body. But that was incorrect. In reality, there was no upper boundary to how much energy could be used. At that time, the strongest PK user had enough power to stop a nuclear attack. So the balance of power shifted to the PK users and governments all over the world collapsed. The history books we have now make no mention of the past civilization because it was, in essence, completely reset. The wheel of time was reversed, and we returned to the dark ages. Due to war, famine, epidemics, and other disasters, the human population fell to under two percent of what it was during the Golden Age."

I felt my heart shudder. It was a really unpleasant feeling. I wanted the false minoshiro to stop talking, but I couldn't get my lips to form words. It seemed like everyone else was in the same state.

"…it is impossible to say for sure what happened during the Dark Age that was the next five-hundred years. Infrastructure collapsed, and naturally, Internet communication was severed. Once again, the spread of information was limited by geography, and people reverted to living in a narrow, closed-off world," the false minoshiro said cheerfully, as if this were wonderful news. "However, some new books were published during that time. The most reliable literature from that era, says that societies in Northeast Asia were split into four conflicting groups. Ironically, due to the sharp decrease in population, such segregation was possible. The first group was slave empires ruled by PK users. The second was non-PK hunter-gatherer tribes that wanted to escape the slave empires. The third were wandering bandits who used PK to pillage and murder. And last was scientists who wanted to preserve the ancient knowledge and technology."

"Books, like the ones you mentioned earlier, the really small ones inside you?" Shun asked, breaking the silence.

The tension eased a little as the subject changed.

"No. Normal books made with the old printing method. Our library scan these books and record the character data."

I stopped understanding what it was saying right as it got to the main point.

"So you're with the fourth group then?"

"There was regular contact, but apart from that, we did not work together. Libraries exist to protect human knowledge, but were unfortunately the target of many attacks during that age. Because of this, automotive archive robots were invented. In urban areas there were once models that could travel freely through drainage systems, but their functions were destroyed by nuclear attacks. The only types that remained were the ones made to imitate living creatures, impervious to the elements and able to take in and create their own energy. Those were then further modified,

until they were able to change their form according to their surroundings. The Autonomous Evolution version, like me," the false minoshiro said proudly.

"Creating your own energy…so what do you eat?" Mamoru lifted his head.

"Animals of the appropriate size. Organisms like microbes can be consumed and digested as is. Or, when the opportunity arises, I can catch small mammals and suck their blood."

Just imagining that was disgusting. I turned away from the false minoshiro.

"…then what? What happened between the Dark Age and now?" Shun returned to the original topic.

"During the Dark Age, there were no groups apart from those four, right? So which one…?"

I finally understood. We were direct descendants of one of the four groups.

"The first to die out were the bandits."

Hearing this, I was slightly relieved.

"Each family of bandits were made of about twenty or thirty related members. Because they did not hesitate to use PK, and sometimes massacred entire towns, they were highly feared. However, this lifestyle was extremely unstable. To the bandits, the slave empires and nomads were prey, but to these two groups, the bandits were nothing more than a nuisance, so they used every possible method to exterminate them."

"Every possible method?" Satoru asked, though I wished he hadn't.

"The bandits' preferred method of transportation was by automatic two-wheeled vehicles. Although in that time there were no longer any means to produce engines and tires, they used PK to revive iron production techniques. They used hundreds of kilos of iron to make wheels and used PK to propel them at speeds of three hundred kilometers per hour. They tore through the plains, sparks flying from the wheels, ransacking towns as they went. Whenever the villagers saw the dust clouds and heard the roar of their engines, they knew the death gods were coming. In defense, the villagers dug pits lined with sharp bamboo spears and strung thin wires up at neck-height. They also used other simple yet effective traps such as planting land mines, putting slow-acting poisons in food set out as bait, infecting young women with deadly diseases and letting the bandits rape them, and more."

Once again, I was so disgusted I had to fight the urge to throw up.

"Of course, the bandits retaliated by attacking mercilessly with PK, but their downfall ultimately came from infighting. Since they were all related by blood, the bandits were formidable against enemies from outside the group, but within the ranks, there was always the fear of being killed by a fellow bandit. To survive, they had to be wary of any sign of hostility from another member. This kill-before-you're-killed mentality escalated to the point that dissolution of the group was inevitable."

We wiped the sweat from our faces and tried to undo the knots in our stomach. But it seemed like Mamoru had finally reached his limit; he turned and started throwing up into the thickets.

"Stop it! Shut up!" Satoru shouted. "Don't listen to what it says!"

"No…hold on. I just have a few more questions," Shun said, though he was pale as a ghost. "That's enough about the bandits. What happened to the other three groups?"

"The approximately nineteen slave empires in Northeast Asia survived for six hundred years on a policy of mutual nonaggression and nonintervention. Out of the four empires that existed in

the Japanese archipelago, I only have records of the Holy Cherry Blossom Empire, which consisted of the Kanto and Chubu regions. The Holy Cherry Blossom Empire's longevity was second only to the New Yamato Empire, which encompassed everything west of Kansai. However, the Holy Cherry Blossom Empire went through ninety-four generations of emperors in five-hundred seventy years."

"You don't have to tell us the histories of all ninety-four of them," Maria said, frowning.

"Why did the emperors succeed each other so rapidly?" Shun looked more shaken than the rest of us, but pressed onward resolutely.

"*A Study of the Holy Cherry Blossom Empire* quotes historian J.E. Acton, 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute powers corrupt absolutely'. The PK users that ruled the slave empires wielded a power that had never before existed in the history of humanity. They were literally god-like, but such powers came with equally devastating consequences."

The false minoshiro's story was so captivating that we hung onto its every word despite our better judgment.

"The Holy Cherry Blossom Empire started as an oligarchy ruled by a select group of PK users. Wave after wave of political purges occurred until only one person remained, who then ruled as an absolute monarch."

"The emperor's whereabouts were always concealed, and he traveled with numerous body-doubles, but in an empire with a large population of PK users, it was impossible to detect and thwart every assassination attempt. So after the bandits died out, one family of PK users ruled over tens of thousands of citizens. But even this couldn't bring true peace and stability."

"…let's go back already. I'm kind of tired, and I've been thirsty for a while now," Mamoru complained tearfully with his hands still over his ears.

Nobody moved.

"*A Study of the Holy Cherry Blossom Empire* reports that all six of longest-reigning emperors had the same psychological ailment. Numerous researchers from the Historical Fieldwork Research Society/ Sakura Observation Group lost their lives investigating this topic."

Apart from Mamoru, the rest of us had succumbed to a new form of hypnosis. The false minoshiro's voice had penetrated our eardrums and was echoing directly inside our minds.

"Each emperor was granted a posthumous name depending on the deeds he achieved during his name. In some cases, there were also derisive monikers given by the public. Records state that during the coronation of the fifth emperor, the Emperor of Delight, the public's cheers and applause went on for three days and three nights. It may sound like just an exaggeration, but the truth of the matter was later revealed. The first hundred people to stop clapping were turned into sacrifices. They were set on fire, and their blackened bodies turned into statues to decorate the palace. From then on, the Emperor of Delight was called the Emperor of Eternal Screams," the false minoshiro continued placidly.

"The thirteenth emperor, Empress Airin, was called the Queen of Sorrow. Every morning, she took joy in watching public executions of people who had displeased her in some slight way. It became customary for palace workers to fast so as not to throw up in horror during the executions."

"…thirty-third emperor, the Emperor of Magnanimity, was nicknamed the Wolf King his entire life, but it gradually took on a negative connotation. This was because he would often go out for a walk in the city on a whim, and leave a mountain of corpses in his wake, like the aftermath of a rampaging beast. The Emperor of Magnanimity's PK image was of the maw of a giant beast dismembering the limbs of people, though parts of the corpses were said to bear the teeth marks of the emperor himself."

"…Magnanimity's son, the thirty-fourth emperor, the Emperor of Pure Virtue, was called the Heretic King after his death. When he was twelve, he strangled his sleeping father and fed him to the dogs. He was praised by the public, but he soon became paranoid of being assassinated himself, so one by one, he killed his younger brothers and male cousins and let roaches devour their bodies. But even though there were no longer many PK users who could usurp him, his rule was exposed to other threats. Assassination attempts by normal citizens began. In the end, the Emperor of Pure Virtue developed an abnormal obsession with feeding live humans to wild animals."

"…sixty-fourth emperor, the Empress of Holy Beneficence, was nicknamed the Owl Queen even before she came to power. She believed in all sorts of strange cults, and her PK manifestation was a monstrous owl that came out during the full moon and abducted pregnant girls, cut out their fetuses, skewered them, and offered them up on an alter to the deviant gods of these cults."

I shuddered. The image I envisioned when using my cantus was very similar to that; I could clearly picture a giant creature swooping through the night sky.

"…became customary for the succeeding emperor to kill the current one in order to take his place. Once the successor reached puberty and his PK was awakened, the emperor's life was a candle in the wind. As such, the princes were kept under close watch for signs of rebellion, and it was extremely common for them to be killed preemptively, or thrown in a dungeon with their eyes put out. The seventy-ninth emperor, the Emperor of Merciful Light, realized that he could use his PK the night he turned nine years old. At daybreak, he snuck toward the palace and hid himself in the niche behind one of the big vases that lined the hall, where he had a perfect view of the throne. The moment his father, the Emperor of Sincerity, sat down on the throne, he stopped his heart. Then, using his PK to make it appear as though his father were still alive, he snapped the necks of all the emperor's advisors and aides and hid their bodies in vases along the hall. Over twenty people were killed, but to the Emperor of Merciful Light, known as the most heinous murderer in the history of the Holy Cherry Blossom Empire, this was just a warm-up exercise. To him, killing was as natural as breathing. Some even suspected that half the time he wasn't even aware that he was using his PK when he slaughtered his retainers and citizens. During his reign, the population dropped by half, corpses piled up in the fields, drawing clouds of flies that blocked out the sky, and the smell of decay could be detected from kilometers away. Nowadays, the name Emperor of Merciful Light has been forgotten, and only the King of Carnage remains. But the extent of his inhuman personality can be seen…"

"Stop! I told you to stop already!" Satoru screamed. "What's the point of listening to this? Everything could be made up, for all we know. Shun, drop it already. This'll drive us crazy."

"…I don't enjoy listening to this either," Shun licked his bloodless lips and looked at the false minoshiro. "How did our society come about? That's all I want to know. Don't tell me anything unnecessary. Just explain how our society came to be."

"The five centuries of the Dark Age ended with the demise of the slave empires. They had long since severed contact with the mainland, and through intergenerational elimination, the PK bloodlines in the Japanese islands had all but died out. The empires split and fought amongst each other. The wandering hunters living in the wild began plotting attacks against the now ungoverned towns, but the towns banded together and the wars increased in intensity. In the decades of fighting that followed, the number of people killed was greater than the sum of PK victims in the past five hundred years. The scientists, who had only been observers until now, stepped in at this time to impose order."

So that's what it was. A warm feeling of relief spread throughout my chest. The blood of the emperors didn't flow through our veins, much less those of the bandits. We were descendants of the group that always sought to protect logic and rationality.

"…but how did that society become the current one? The commoners of the slave empires and the hunter-gatherers didn't have cantus…PK, right? Where did they go?" Shun asked in rapid succession.

The false minoshiro seemed to have anticipated this. "There are few reliable sources from the past few centuries. Unfortunately, I cannot answer your question."

"Why? The scientists must have kept records, right?" Maria pursed her lips.

"They did during the Dark Age. But in trying to impose control and create a new society, different policies were adopted. Since all knowledge is essentially a double-edged sword, they wanted to control the flow of information as strictly as possible. Unfortunately, this meant that a lot of books were burned. The Tsukuba Branch of the National Diet Library, in other words, I, analyzed the situation and determined that this was a dangerous situation. For the time being, I decided to hide out in Mount Tsukuba along with numerous backups."

The false minoshiro's definition of 'for the time being' seemed to encompass a couple centuries.

"After that, the library's outer shell changed, growing feelers to imitate a minoshiro. Even if a cantus-wielding human came along, I could use light hypnosis, one of my add-on features, to make a getaway…"

"I'm not asking about that!" Shun snapped. "How did the society change from theirs to ours? No, maybe it didn't change. The scientists were the ones that created the current society, right? If they were our ancestors, they would've had cantus. But unlike the emperors and bandits, they never fought. Why is that?"

"Isn't that…" *obvious*, I wanted to say, but swallowed my words.

I realized it wasn't obvious. If our world was really like one of Scheherazade's stories, then human history was an incredibly bloodstained one. In other words, if this living thing called a human was intrinsically so violent and bloodthirsty that even tiger crabs pale in comparison, then why was our current society so peaceful?

"They realized the infinite potential, as well as the destructive power of PK, so the biggest issue at the end of the previous civilization was how to protect oneself from harm. To this end,

psychologists, sociologists, biologists, and other researchers conducted various studies, but there is no information on which policies they adopted in the end."

"What were some ideas they had?" I asked.

"One of the first proposals was the importance of education. Early education about sensibility, logical and moral education stemming from parental guidance, zealous proselytizing about religion, every aspect of education was clearly laid out. But results showed that although education was of life-or-death importance, it wasn't omnipotent. No matter how perfect the education system was, humankind's violent tendencies could not be completely repressed."

Although it was merely summarizing the content of various texts, the false minoshiro spoke as fluently as if it were espousing its own beliefs.

"Another suggestion was a psychological approach. Anger management techniques that trained the mind, such as zen, yoga, and transcendental meditation, along with more extreme measures like psychotropic drugs were also studied. Both were effective, though it was immediately clear that neither was a panacea. However, psychological and behavioral tests could filter out potential problem-children with almost perfect accuracy. So the next step was to implement the 'Rotten Apple Theory'. After that, it became convention to eliminate a child who showed any warning signs."

A chill ran up my spine. I didn't want to think about it, but I couldn't help it.

Could it be that this convention was still accepted these days? In Harmony School, and in Sage Academy…

"But even that wasn't enough to avert all dangers. Even normal humans, warm, friendly people leading fulfilling lives, can forget themselves in a moment of anger. Research indicates that ninety percent of peoples' stress comes from other people. How do you maintain a safe society if, in a split second of intense anger, you could easily rip off the head of the person in front of you?"

The false minoshiro's speech entranced us so thoroughly that we could offer no rebuttals. Thinking back on it, this trait might be one of its many self-preserving functions.

"Once the psychological approach was exhausted, it was replaced with medications designed to regulate hormonal balance in the brain. This method too soon revealed its limitations, because it was impossible to keep people on medication for their entire lives. The next notion to take the precedence was ethology, focused on the societies of primates called bonobos. Bonobos are sometimes called pygmy chimpanzees, but while chimpanzees are known to fight amongst each other, sometimes to the death, there are almost no violent physical encounters in bonobo groups."

"How come?" I asked.

"When stress and anxiety among members of a group arise, they relieve it through intimate sexual behavior. Mature males and females engage in intercourse, but even immature and same-sex individuals will rub their genitals together in an act of sexual play. Primatologists and sociologists decided that it was of utmost importance to change the current violent society into one of love, like the bonobos'."

"How did they change it?"

"The book *Toward a Society of Love* lists three steps. The first was to have frequent physical contact like hand-holding, hugging, and cheek-kissing. The second step was to encourage such contact between the opposite as well as the same sex from childhood to puberty. They wanted to

make it a habit to use sexual play, and the ensuing orgasms, to dispel tensions between people. And the third step was to encourage free sex among mature humans. Of course, convenient and reliable contraceptives would be needed."

We glanced at each other.

"…so, people back then weren't like this?" Maria asked apprehensively, her brows knitted.

"I have no data regarding the current state of society, so it is difficult to draw a comparison, but in the ancient civilization, there were numerous levels of taboo regarding physical contact. Also, in many places, homosexual love was forbidden and oppressed. Same with free sex."

For us, physical contact was a perfectly normal, everyday occurrence. Girls with guys, girls with girls, boys with boys, adults with adults, children with children, and adults with children. Basically, intimate contact between people was a good thing. The only exception being that any actions that might result in pregnancy; upon fulfilling certain conditions, a permit could be obtained from the Ethics Committee.

"But even that was not sufficient. Computer simulations predicted that the society would collapse within ten years even if all the proposed measures were carried out perfectly. The reason for this was abundantly clear. All the members in a PK society possessed the equivalent of a launch button for a nuclear missile. If just one person lost control, the entire infrastructure would be destroyed."

As before, I could only understand about half of what the false minoshiro was saying. Nevertheless, the gravity of what it was saying was apparent.

"Human behavior can be controlled with education, psychology, and eugenics. And since humans are also a type of primates, ethology can also be applied to create a safer environment. However, in order to protect the dam called society, not even a single crack can be allowed in its walls. The final solution brought about the idea that humans were nothing more than social mammals and to treat them as such."

How ironic. Just when humanity had at last attained power equal to the gods, it was more than they could handle. In order to control such power, humans were demoted to the level of monkeys, and then from monkeys to mere mammals.

"A ethologist called Konrad Lorenz who lived during the peak of the previous civilization said that powerful animals like wolves and ravens, as well as social animals, have an innate mechanism that causes them to avoid conflict with members of their own species. This is called attack control. On the other hand, physically weaker animals like humans and rats do not have as much control and tend to fight amongst each other, to the point of violent massacre. So if PK users are to live together in society, a powerful restraint on violence is essential."

"But how did they do it?" Shun whispered as if talking to himself.

"The only effective way was to alter the human genome. Wolf DNA was decoded and the gene responsible for attack control was isolated. But just that is not enough. Something that could suspend their ability to attack is also necessary."

"So in other words, you're saying that human's attack control abilities didn't come from wolves, but from some other incredibly powerful thing?"

"There is no concrete data as to whether humans were able to manipulate genes to that extent, so there is only conjecture. However, two mechanisms were inserted into the genetic code. The first was regular attack control identical to the wolves'. And the second was something called 'death feedback'."

A shock ran through me. Death feedback was something that we had heard again and again since Harmony School, and was deeply engraved in our consciousness. It was the most shameful, horrible way for a person to die.

"In the beginning, they came up with 'conscience feedback', which would disrupt a person's concentration when they wanted to attack someone with PK, to complement the attack control mechanism. But the results were inconsistent, so they were unable to use it in the real world. Its replacement was the simple yet effective 'death feedback'. 'Death feedback' operated on the following principles. When the mind recognizes that the user is attempting to harm another human, their PK subconsciously activates and stops the functions of the kidney or parathyroid. This results in symptoms such as discomfort, heart palpitations, and sweating, which can be intensified through education, conditioning, and hypnosis. At this stage, most people would stop attacking, but if they continued, tetanic asphyxia caused by low blood calcium, or cardiac arrest caused by a rapid spike in potassium concentration would kill them."

"That's…impossible," Satoru choked out.

If all that were true, what exactly have we believed in all these years? That we, humans, had been granted the power of gods because of our virtues was what we had always been taught. But in reality, without the threat of death holding us back, we would fight until mankind was destroyed. Didn't that mean we were even baser animals than wolves and ravens?

"That's a lie! It's all bullshit," Maria said through gritted teeth.

"But it makes sense," Shun said in a low voice.

"So you believe it?"

Instead of answering me, Shun asked the false minoshiro, "…did fiends appear after that?"

I frowned. This was where our conversation had started, but what do fiends have anything to do with what the false minoshiro was saying right now?

"No. Fiends, or sufferers of the Raman-Klogius syndrome, existed before the fall of the previous civilization. Karma demons, cases of Hashimoto-Appelbaum syndrome, is presumed to have developed at during the same period. But in the chaos during the wars and the Dark Age, their existence did not garner much attention."

At that time, I didn't really understand what the false minoshiro meant. But thinking back on it, fiends and karma demons would have been perfectly camouflaged in a world ruled by violence where bloodshed and death were everyday occurrences.

"So you're saying we only started noticing fiends and karma demons since our society came about? But doesn't it seem like our society was structured specifically to prevent their appearances to begin with?" Shun asked sharply.

"I do not have information about the present society, so I cannot answer your question."

"But what you said earlier about death feedback, why do fiends…"

"W-wait a sec," Satoru interrupted, sounding flustered. "Shun, you might understand what's going on, but we're not following at all. Fiends, that Klogius thing, what exactly is that? And what's the difference between fiends and karma demons?"

"Raman-Klogius syndrome is another name for…"

We were all listening intently, but the rest of the sentence would never be heard.

The false minoshiro and the tiger crab holding it were suddenly enveloped in white-hot flames.

We jumped back instinctively, and stared dazedly at what was happening. The tiger crab let go of the minoshiro and tried to flee. It waved its pincers wildly and dragged its body across the ground, but couldn't put out flames. It let out a screech, curled up on its back and eventually stopped moving.

The false minoshiro writhed back and forth, its body secreting large amounts of thick, foamy liquid. But it was as if the flames had come from the pits of hell and could not be extinguished. Its rubbery skin melted in the heat and quickly burned out.

Then, something strange appeared above the burning body of the false minoshiro.

A mother holding an infant. It was a three-dimensional image. She looked appealingly at us with tears in her eyes. Breathing became painful, and our bodies froze up.

Amazingly, the flames disappeared the moment the image of the mother appeared. But it seems like the false minoshiro had played its trump card too late. Weird lines started flickering through it as it slowly darkened and suddenly disappeared.

Soon, the false minoshiro stopped moving as well. Acrid, white smoke rose from its blackened body.

"Who…?" Satoru asked hoarsely, looking around at us.

"Who what?" Maria asked blankly.

"You saw that, right? The way the fire burned was unbelievable. It had to have been created by cantus, I think. But who did it?"

When we heard the answer come from a voice behind us, we all jumped.

"I did."

It was someone in dressed in priest's clothes. He was astonishingly tall, with sharp, hawk-like eyes. His head looked freshly shaved, and beads of sweat covered his forehead.

"That was a demon whose words beguile the mind and ensnare the spirit. It must be incinerated on sight. What in the world are you doing here?"

"We were…" Satoru made to answer, but was at a loss for words.

"Traveling up the Tone River for summer camp," Maria finished the sentence.

"Did the school give you permission to come this far?" The priest crossed his arms, looking grimmer by the second.

We didn't dare lie any more.

"…sorry. We did not receive permission. We did not mean to come this far." Shun said deferentially.

"I see. You didn't mean to? So you trapped some crabs for fun, accidentally caught that demon, and then accidentally got on the subject of fiends."

None of us said a word. There was no way to explain our way out of the situation.

"I am Rijin, a priest emeritus serving at the Temple of Purity. I know very well who all of you are."

The priest emeritus held the highest position of the educational division at the temple. I suddenly remembered. He had been standing beside Head Priest Mushin as the second in command at the initiation ceremony.

"You will now come to the temple with me. You will not be allowed to return to town until Head Priest Mushin has been informed of this."

"Please wait a moment. Before we go, I have just one question," Shun pointed at the false minoshiro's remains. "Was everything it said a lie?"

Our hearts pounded painfully in our chests as we listened. He shouldn't have asked, I thought. Just as I expected, Rijin looked at us with a strange glitter in his eyes.

"Do you believe it?"

"I don't know. It's very different from the knowledge we've learned in school. But there was a consistency to what it said."

Shun's words exposed what we were all feeling. But in situations like this, honesty may not be the best policy.

"You have broken the rules coming to a place you do not belong. Furthermore, you have been swayed by the words of a demon. That alone is a grave sin, but the real problem is much greater." Rijin's voice was so cold it froze our blood. "You have violated the very foundations of the Code of Ethics, the last of the Ten Precepts, 'Do not desecrate the Three Jewels'. You have fallen for the words of a demon, and questioned the teachings of Buddha. Therefore, I must seal your cantus immediately."

Rijin reached into his robes and brought out a sheaf of papers. Two folded half-sheets that formed a human shape. He put five in front of us.

The head and trunk of the figure were covered in strange symbols that looked like Sanskrit. I remembered the ceremony at the Temple of Purity when Head Priest Mushin had temporarily sealed my cantus.

No, I thought. I don't want to lose my cantus. I don't want relive that feeling of helplessness I had before I graduated from Harmony School. But we weren't in a position to disobey.

"Now, I will seal you cantus inside these emblems," Rijin announced. "Make your emblems stand."

I uprighted the figure in front of me. Suddenly, tears were spilling out of my eyes and down my cheeks.

"Shun Aonuma! Maria Akizuki! Satoru Asahina! Mamoru Itou! Saki Watanabe!" Rijin's voice echoed through the surrounding trees, "Your cantus have been sealed here!"

A multitude of needles, like crimson wasps, flew from his hand and impaled the figures through the head, torso and limbs.

"May your mind heal…let your desires be burned away…and the ashes return to the vast, wild earth…" Rijin chanted in a low voice as the emblems burned up in a burst of flames.

That was all fake. It was nothing more than a simple hypnotic suggestion. It shouldn't have rendered me unable to use my cantus. It only worked before because I was still young, and hadn't made my cantus my own. Now, my cantus belongs wholly to me. No one can take it away.

I desperately tried to convince myself of that. But Rijin wasn't finished with the sealing ritual yet.

"Remember, you gave up your cantus in front of Buddha at the Temple of Purity. Through Buddha's compassion, you received a pure mantra from Head Priest Mushin, summoned a new spirit, and were granted your cantus once again." Rijin's voice took on an ominous note, "But you, who have strayed from the Buddha's path, your spirits have fled, and your mantras vanished. Take this to heart. You will never remember your mantra again."

He was using a hook embedded in our subconscious, like during the initiation ceremony. In order to give a new suggestion, all he had to do was call up that hook, then control our minds in any way he liked.

At the time though, it worked like magic. The mantra that we usually had engraved in our hearts disappeared without a trace.

I looked around at my friends, trying to find a ray of hope, but everyone bore the same expression. Satoru was shaking his head, face twisted like he was about to cry.

"Now then, let's go." Rijin gave us a contemptuous look. "Don't drag your feet. We must reach the temple by sundown."

II

Summer Darkness

1

After walking for about an hour, our originally light backpacks had gradually become heavier and heavier until it felt like we had stuffed the canoes into them. We slowed so much we were barely making any progress.

Ever since we entered Sage Academy, we had relied on our cantus to do a lot of work for us, and so probably neglected to train our bodies, but even above that, having our powers taken from us made us feel even more weak and helpless.

Once in a while Rijin would come down from his lotus seat and observe our turtle-like movements with an expression of disdain and irritation, but he never said a word. He probably thought it was useless to talk to us.

The lotus seat floated two meters off the ground; Rijin sat upon it cross-legged as if meditating. We lagged about thirty meters behind, looking up at him as if from the bottom of a pond.

"That's true levitation," Shun whispered, as if trying to suppress his emotions.

Even adults who had mastered all the classes in Sage Academy couldn't necessarily do it. And compared to us making the canoe speed through the water, this was on a completely different level.

"I get making something float while you're riding it, but exactly what image is he using to propel himself through the air?"

In the beginning cantus courses, we first learn to move a stationary object. In order to move yourself through the air, you have to focus on a fixed point around you, which is a lot more difficult. For people like Rijin who have trained extensively, their image probably uses themselves as a fixed point while the rest of the world flows around them.

"What image he's using doesn't even matter anymore, right?" Satoru said bitterly. "It's not like we'll ever get to use our cantus again."

We all fell silent. Mamoru, who had been on the verge of tears this whole time, finally broke down crying. Maria also let out a sob.

"That's not true. Don't say stuff like that!" I glared at Satoru. "We'll definitely be able to use it again."

"How do you know?" Satoru said, staring back with an unusual ferocity.

"We haven't lost our cantus, it's just been temporarily sealed."

"Do you really think they're going to unseal it?" Satoru leaned in close to me, a note of menace in his voice. "You remember what the false minoshiro said, right? We're 'rotten apples' that know too much. We'll be targeted for removal soon."

"That's…" I had nothing to say in return.

"Isn't it weird though, Saki?" Shun turned and whispered even more quietly than Satoru.

"What's weird?"

"That Rijin priest. He's been acting strangely for a while now."

I looked up at him carefully.

"I don't see anything strange. Wasn't he always like that?" Satoru muttered with barely a glance at Rijin.

"Wait…he does look weird."

Until now, I had only been paying attention to our own problems and hadn't noticed. But Rijin was indeed acting strangely. His body movements as he was sitting were abnormal. Since he was in a seated meditation pose, he should have been breathing with his abdomen, but his shoulders were heaving visibly as he breathed. There was also a sheen of sweat on the back of his head.

"Maybe he's sick?" Shun said.

"So, what's it to us? Why should we have to worry about him?" Satoru complained.

"No…it's just what I thought," Shun appeared to have confirmed his suspicions.

"What do you think it is?"

"The curse of the false minoshiro."

Satoru snorted, "I already said that was a lie, didn't I? It's just a rumor."

"No, seems like it's not exactly a lie. Remember when the false minoshiro burned up?" Shun directed the question toward me.

"Yeah, of course."

"Just for a second, there was the image of a person floating above it, right? A mother holding a child."

"What about it?"

"I think that's probably an image it uses to protect itself from people."

"That's what I thought too."

"When I saw it, it made me feel really sick. You guys did as well, right? And not to mention, since Rijin attacked the false minoshiro, he would feel it even more. The reason the fire went out was probably because he lost his concentration."

"So you mean…that feeling is the effect?" I didn't quite grasp the point yet.

"It's the death feedback. Just like the false minoshiro said.

I gasped. Why hadn't I realized what he was saying earlier?

"After the false minoshiro shows the image, all it needs is a moment's pause in the enemy's attack for it to escape. But for humans, just one moment is enough to trigger the feedback. Though since they're not attacking a real human, it wouldn't kill them instantly…"

I was astonished at the depth of Shun's analysis. Future research will very likely be based on the death feedback's vulnerability to the curse of the false minoshiro, or in other words, images generated by false minoshiro. When you see an image like that, even if it's an illusion, the idea that

you are committing an atrocious act of harming another human lingers in your subconscious. A month or two later, when your rational control weakens, the memory will resurface and the death feedback might just kill you.

"So are you saying he'll be dead in a month or so?" Satoru asked gloatingly. "For destroying library property."

"…possibly even earlier than that," Shun said thoughtfully, looking up at Rijin.

"Isn't that even better? If he dies, he won't be able to tell on us for what we did," Satoru replied.

"Don't say stupid things like that!" I hissed. "None of us can use our cantus now, right? If he does die and leaves us here, how in the world are we going to get back home?"

Even though those were my own words, when I saw the fear in their eyes, I shuddered as well. I realized again just how helpless we were.

But if we kept going toward the Temple of Purity, I don't think we could expect to receive a warm welcome, just as Satoru said. No matter how I thought of it, our "disposal" seemed the only conclusion. Though that may be true, if we tried to escape recklessly, we might end up in an even worse situation. Out of the frying pan and into the fire. There was no way out of the situation.

In this way, two hours passed. Our pace became slower and slower, until it felt like a snail could overtake us. At this rate, I doubted we would ever make it to the Temple of Purity.

There was a noise in the bushes on my left.

Rijin turned around. Leaves and shrubs flew through the air.

Its concealment gone, the creature in hiding was revealed.

"A queerat," Shun whispered.

I thought back to that day after school where we had seen two queerats almost drown in the canals. This was about two times bigger. Maybe even as tall as I was. It looked as if it hadn't figured out what had happened yet, sniffing at the air with its wrinkled snout.

"But it seems kind of different."

I had the same feeling as Maria. It had bows and arrows slung over its back and was wearing what looked like leather armor. But it was not just its equipment that was strange. Something else was off.

"What's up with it? It has such an insolent attitude."

Satoru hit the nail on the head. All the queerats we had seen before definitely didn't behave like this.

The two Goat Moth queerats we had rescued had been so polite they were almost groveling, even towards us children. In contrast, this queerat showed not an ounce of fear as it stood in front of Rijin's lotus seat.

Suddenly, it turned and starting shouting.

"Gagagaga! ЖДЮК! Grrrrr. Chichichichichichi. ☆▲Å!"

What followed was unbelievable. It drew an arrow and aimed it at Rijin, glaring with its red, beady eyes.

In an instant both bow and arrow were consumed in white flames. The queerat dropped them with a shriek and tried to run, but Rijin caught it with his cantus and dragged it back kicking and screaming.

"You, a mere beast, dare raise your hands against me?" Rijin said coldly as the queerat made incomprehensible noises.

The queerat's cone-shaped hat was blown away.

"No tattoo, huh? Where did you come from?"

The queerat bared its yellow teeth and snarled menacingly. It didn't seem to understand words.

"There are no wild colonies in Japan. So you must be a foreign species," Rijin muttered.

Like we had done to the tiger crabs, he turned the queerat around to examine it. And he did it again, this time keeping the head still. The queerat let out one last shriek, then went limp as its neck snapped.

Rijin turned back toward us. The queerat's corpse thudded to the ground.

"It seems a foreign species has somehow managed to invade our land. Since I'm responsible for bringing you all safely to the temple, this is somewhat problematic," Rijin grimaced. "Therefore, you must help as well. Of course, only to the extent that you are able to."

There was a faint noise and Satoru flinched and spun around to look behind us. The panic on his face was really starting to stress me out.

"If you're going to turn around every ten seconds, why don't you just walk backwards?"

"What are you talking about? Anyway, how can you be walking along so unconcernedly? Like I said earlier, you're just totally oblivious," Satoru snapped back.

"Look at Shun and Maria. They're at walking at the very front and neither are as scared as you are."

"You idiot! You don't understand. The last person is always in the most danger!" Satoru's face flushed with anger. "Don't you remember that queerat from earlier was calling to something behind it? Its allies could be anywhere."

"I know that."

"Then don't you think it's possible they'll retaliate? And if they do, why would they come from the front? They'd be seen, right?"

I didn't want to admit it, but he had a very good point.

The reason I didn't want to admit it was not because I didn't want to lose to Satoru. Rijin must be well aware of the fact that being rear guard was more dangerous. In other words, it probably meant he thought Shun and Maria were more worth protecting, while Satoru and I were disposable.

But going by this theory, it seemed like the one he valued the most was also the one he was treating the most cruelly, Mamoru.

Mamoru was sitting on the lotus seat. Under the pretense of being lookout, Rijin was floating the seat higher than before, about three meters off the ground. But it was obvious to everyone that he was using Mamoru as a decoy.

Rijin was walking close behind, his sharp hawk-like eyes looking in every direction. He was also sweating profusely, which was caused by the false minoshiro's projection, but it had gotten visibly worse since he killed the queerat.

"Something's there!" Mamoru shouted from the lotus seat.

"Halt!" Rijin commanded.

We halted, looking around anxiously.

"What do you see?"

"I can't really tell, but something…something's moving. About a hundred meters ahead," Mamoru replied, his lip quivering.

Rijin appeared to be in deep thought.

"What's he thinking about?" I asked Satoru.

Satoru licked his lips. "If the queerats are lying in wait and we keep going, we'll be in range of their arrows," he explained calmly. "No matter how much power that priest has, he's still only human. He's still vulnerable to preemptive strikes by the enemy, so it's best be proceed with caution in a situation like this."

Even with the omnipotent power of cantus, you'd still die if you were shot. It was a sobering thought.

Still, if things were going to turn out like this, I would rather our cantus not have been sealed. I'm sure Rijin was regretting it too. I hoped that he would decide to unseal our powers, but unfortunately we had no such luck.

"Mamoru Itou," Rijin looked up at the lotus seat. "Listen up. Are there any queerats? Take a good look. Don't be afraid. I will protect you with my cantus. Not a single one of their arrows will touch you."

Mamoru's face blanched as he realized what was about to happen.

"N-no…stop!"

The rest of us held our breaths as the lotus seat drifted ahead to where we thought the queerats might be hiding and stopped. The seat spun around once or twice. We waited anxiously, but nothing happened. Finally, Rijin brought the lotus seat back, and fixed Mamoru with a hard look.

"Well? Were there are queerats?"

"I don't know." Mamoru's face was completely bloodless and he trembled like a tiny, frightened animal. "I didn't…see anything."

"Didn't you say that something moved?"

"But I didn't see anything just now. I was probably wrong earlier."

Rijin nodded, but did not set off again immediately. He was not only a skilled cantus user, but astute as well. After deliberating for a while, he looked up again.

"You said you saw movement somewhere around there," Rijin pointed.

Mamoru nodded silently.

"Sterilization it is, then."

There was a rumbling sound and the ground a ways ahead of us started moving. The trees fell one by one. The earth churned like a giant, writhing snake as rocks and dirt came crashing down.

In less than five minutes the grove of beautiful green trees was buried under a mountain of soil.

We would never know whether queerats were really hiding there, but I guess it didn't really matter anymore.

From now on, our progress would be even slower.

Needless to say, we were a bit wary of the area Rijin had just "sterilized". Looking back, it was as if the Destroyer Shiva had ridden through on his juggernaut, ravaging the peaceful scenery, leaving behind a procession of death and fear. Now, no matter how belligerent these foreign queerats were, they would be stupid to even think about attacking us head on.

But this outcome was disadvantageous for everyone involved. The queerats had their path blocked off, so we wouldn't be susceptible to a direct attack, but this had also been the quickest way for us to reach the Temple of Purity before sundown.

Needless to say, the only reason we were even in a hurry in the first place was due to the appearance of the foreign queerats. The cause and consequence were the same, going round and round like an ouroboros.

When we had climbed halfway up the newly formed hill, we saw the first rows of the queerats' defensive formation.

"Ah! What's that?" Shun said from the head of the line.

As we crested the hill, hundreds of silhouettes suddenly came into view. The silhouettes were all beating weapons, gongs and other metallic objects, creating an earthshaking battle cry.

"It looks like they're getting ready to charge this way," Maria's voice twisted into a shriek.

"You have no place in the three realms; it is only through Buddha's grace that you can exist as beasts. And yet you insist on foolishly challenging me," Rijin said gravely. "Very well, I shall exorcise you."

No, I thought. They didn't actually want to fight us.

If the queerats truly intended to attack us, they would've rushed us from behind. But they didn't; instead they redirected their route this way in hopes of avoiding conflict. As I listened, their war cry sounded more like a painful supplication than a call to battle.

A gust of wind swept past my cheeks.

Looking up, I saw Rijin creating what looked like a giant tornado.

As if in response, the queerats' war cry grew.

In the next instant, all the debris from the tornado was flung down the hill. Flying logs and boulders mowed down the rows of queerats in no time.

There was a second's pause, then with scream of fear and rage, a barrage of arrows came raining down on us.

But the arrows were no match for the wind, which sent them spinning away wildly.

"You filthy pests…will be exterminated," Rijin said ominously, his voice hoarse.

"Stop!" I screamed, but no one heard me.

My voice was drowned out by the howling wind that sounded like a knife ripping through silk. Or like a woman's shriek, but an octave higher. In that instant, I thought I saw countless winged, scythe-wielding demonesses rising out of the ground and swooping down on the queerats.

Regardless of whether that vision was real or not, the queerats fell in rapid succession.

I realized it was a wind scythe. An intense whirlwind with a vacuum in the center that acted like innumerable knives, tearing the victim to pieces. In order to create a wind scythe with your cantus you needed to accurately imagine the movement of the air, something that by nature was invisible and formless, so it was an extremely difficult technique that few could master.

In the blink of an eye, the queerats were decimated.

My head was swimming. I could see the spray of blood and smell its disgusting stench even though in reality I was too far away to do either.

"Alright. He did it…look…there! It's getting away!"

Next to me, Satoru was yelling excitedly, like this massacre was some sort of game.

"Are you stupid? What are you so happy about?" I said sharply.

Satoru looked blankly at me. "But…they're our enemies, aren't they?"

"They're not our real enemies."

"Then who is?"

Before I could answer, it was over. The genocide in the name of Buddha, carried out by the priest who had sworn to serve him. There was not a single silhouette left standing on the hill.

"Okay…let us continue on," Rijin commanded. But his voice was strained.

Satoru and I glanced at each other.

As we climbed the hill, the terrible scene of the queerats' demise came into view. Ravaged corpses, severed heads, and shredded limbs were piled high all around us. Rust-colored blood soaked into every surface, dyeing the ground black, the smell stinging my eyes and nose. Flies that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere were already starting to feast on the remains.

Ahead of us, Shun and Maria faltered before the huge swarm of flies.

Rijin could tell that we all hoped he would get rid of the flies. But the priest simply stood there with no signs of moving.

"What's going on?" Satoru asked quietly.

The silhouettes, I thought instinctively. From a distance, didn't the silhouette of a queerat look a lot like a human's? Since Rijin was already under the false minoshiro's curse, when he killed the queerats with the wind scythe, his subconscious probably interpreted it as him attacking more humans. If that was true, death feedback might really get him this time.

"Rijin, are you alright?" Shun asked.

"…yes. Don't worry," Rijin replied after a pause. His eyes seemed vacant and his words sounded strange.

All our attention was on Rijin, so we didn't notice that something was crawling among the corpses, hidden by the curtain of flies.

"W-What's that?" Maria gasped as she turned around.

A strange animal.

It was the size of a dog, covered in long black fur. In contrast to its stout body, the head was abnormally small and so low that it almost touched the ground as it slunk toward us.

"…a blowdog!" Mamoru cried in a strangled voice.

"What are you talking about? They're not real," Satoru said bluntly, completely disregarding the fact that he had just recently been seriously trying to convince us of the existence of blowdogs.

"But no matter how you look at it, that's what it is," Mamoru said, standing up for his own views for once.

"So you're saying it's going to inflate itself to the size of a balloon? Something so stupid…"

As if in response to Satoru's words, the animal, the blowdog, suddenly swelled to twice its original size.

"Woah. It really puffed up."

I thought it was simply sucking in air to make itself look bigger, but as the blowdog glared at us, it swelled even more.

"Everyone, get back!"

At Shun's words, we all started running, putting as much distance between us and the blowdog as possible.

"What's going to happen?" I asked.

"I don't know," Shun seemed fascinated. "But so far it's acting just as Satoru said it would. It might just keep swelling up until it explodes."

As if in accordance with Shun's words, the blowdog puffed up even more.

"What for?"

"It's a threat," he whispered.

"A threat?"

"It's probably trying to drive us away from that spot."

The blowdog slowly advanced toward Rijin, the only person who hadn't backed away. Seeing no response from Rijin, it swelled up further. It was now the size of a fat sheep.

But why wasn't Rijin moving? I looked at him curiously, but all he did was stand there with his eyes closed. Maybe he was dazed.

The blowdog paused for a moment, waiting silently, then suddenly ballooned to three times its size. Its body was almost entirely spherical now, and white rays of light radiated from between the coarse bristles.

"A warning sign…? Oh no, run!" Shun yelled.

We took off like a shot, barreling down the hill as fast as we could go. The others ran without looking back, but curiosity got the better of me and I stopped. Turning around, I saw that the blowdog had now swelled to a frightening size.

Finally, Rijin opened his eyes. I didn't have time to say a word before the blowdog was enveloped in dazzling flames.

There was a thunderous roar and a fierce gust of wind knocked us over.

We were about thirty meters downhill from the blowdog; if we had been on level ground, the blast would have killed us for sure.

I don't really want to write about what happened afterward. We needed some time to recover from the shock. Then we went to look at the crater left by the explosion.

Rijin had been so close to the explosion that his body was now an unrecognizable mess. Since we couldn't use our cantus to bury him, we simply covered him with dirt. That simple task made me want to throw up.

"Saki, look at this," Shun pulled out something that had been deeply embedded into the ground and held it out.

"What is it?" I hesitated, not taking the object from him.

He held it up for me to get a better look. It looked like a disc surrounded by six sharp, feather-like spikes sticking out in alternate directions.

"Looks like a water wheel propeller."

"It's probably part of the blowdog's spine."

"Its spine?"

Satoru came and took it from Shun, turning it over in his hands.

"It's hard as stone. And heavy too. If you got hit with this you'd probably die."

"They're shaped like this so that when the blowdog dies they'll come flying out."

"Flying out for what?"

"To kill its opponent."

As I looked around, I saw many more of them sticking out of the ground. Goosebumps stood out on my arms. I didn't know the blowdog could do this much damage.

Satoru brought the bone to his nose and sniffed it.

"What are you doing?" I imagined the smell of blood and grimaced.

"It smells kinda like fireworks."

"Oh? I get it," Shun said, seemingly to himself. "Blowdogs probably have sulfur and saltpeter stored in their bodies so they can make gunpowder. Just inflating themselves to the point of bursting wouldn't create such a powerful explosion… some of its bones act as flint to create the spark that sets everything off."

"W-wait. Are there really animals that have evolved to become suicide bombers?"

It wasn't unusual for animals to try to appear larger in order to intimidate its enemies, but isn't blowing yourself up when the enemy ignores your warnings extremely counterproductive?

"Yeah. Shun, you even said so before we came here. If blowdogs kept blowing themselves up, they'd become extinct in no time."

"That's what I thought. But I just remembered that there was an animal a lot like the blowdog in one of the ancient biology books I read," he said.

"There are more of them?" Satoru and I said in unison.

"Yeah, and by analogy, I have a rough idea of what blowdogs really are."

"What?"

"Oh really? So is it a balloon, or a dog?" Satoru joked.

That was our reaction to shock–to lose our heads just a little bit.

"Stop talking about stupid things!" Maria finally exploded. "Do you even understand the situation we're in? We've been abandoned in the middle of nowhere, and on top of that, none of us can use our cantus…"

We stopped smiling.

"You're right," Shun said, after a heavy silence. "In any case, let's head back the way we came. We'll have to sleep out in the open tonight."

"Hey…!" Satoru said nervously, grabbing Shun by the arm. He jerked his chin toward the crater.

Following his gaze, we froze.

A group of silhouettes stood forty or fifty meters ahead, watching us silently. Queerats.

"…what do we do?" Maria's voice shook.

"Isn't it obvious? We march up and attack," Satoru replied.

"Attack? How are we supposed to do that without cantus?" I shot back.

"They don't know that. If we run, it'll expose our weakness and they'll come after us."

"But if we go, we'll be captured," Mamoru said in a thin voice.

"Exactly! We have to run," Maria said.

As I looked at the queerats, I was filled with conviction.

"They definitely don't want to fight. They just want us to leave."

"How do you know? If that was the case, they should have left first," Satoru said stubbornly.

"Their burrows are over there."

That's why this group was here defending their burrows in the face of death. The blowdog must also have been…

"Okay, let's all back away slowly," Shun said. He only ever took charge when it was absolutely necessary. "Be quiet, don't provoke them. We're done for if they think we're afraid."

He didn't need to say any more. We retreated as quietly as possible. Soon it became dark, and every time I heard the crunch of rocks being stepped on, I was filled with fear.

The queerats watched closely as we backed down the hill, but showed no signs of pursuing us.

"I guess Saki was right. They don't want to fight," Maria said, sounding relieved.

"It's too early to say that for sure," Satoru said gloomily. "They might be waiting for us to let our guard down before attacking."

"Why do you keep saying that?" I snapped. "Do you enjoy the fact that they're afraid of us?"

"Fine, should I say something stupidly optimistic then?" Satoru retorted.

"…Satoru's probably right," Shun said unexpectedly.

"Why?"

"Saki's right that they don't want to fight over there. Maybe because that's where their nests are. But once we get far enough away, who knows what they'll do."

"But…what's the point in attacking?"

"Dude, did you not see what Rijin did earlier? How many queerats do you think he killed? They're not going to be satisfied with just having one of us dead."

Satoru's logic was depressingly sound.

"But they probably think we still have cantus, right? They should be trying to avoid more meaningless deaths," Maria said.

Shun shook his head, "Like Rijin said, they're a foreign species. They might have been civilized in the beginning, but have lost contact with humans for a long time. Remember, that first scout that was caught? It didn't seem to know what cantus was."

"That's true, but shouldn't they have learned to fear it by now?" I said quietly, trying to think from their point of view.

"Yeah. That's why they haven't attacked us yet. But at best, they only half-believe in our powers."

"Why?"

"They're probably thinking that if they had the same powers we did, they would have slaughtered us a long time ago."

There was a silence so heavy that it was hard to breathe.

"…what'll they do from now on?" Satoru asked Shun.

"Once we get far enough from the nests, it's very likely they'll try to strike back."

"And what happens when we can't retaliate?"

Shun's silence was answer enough.

"So how far away from the nest is far enough?" Maria asked worriedly.

"I don't know for sure." Shun looked uphill. "The most dangerous place is probably at the bottom of the hill."

2

As we were walking even more slowly than before, it was well dark before we reached the bottom of the hill.

I was covered in disgusting, cold sweat. My hands were cold as ice, probably due to anxiety.

The queerats stalked us silently, keeping their distance.

According to Shun's explanations, making a crucial decision, such as starting a war, involves searching for a suitable focal point. The focal point has to be easily visible, somewhere where nature and awareness converge.

For example, imagine a hunter with a bow and arrow stalking a deer. The deer runs through the forest, ending up at a riverbank, where chances of the hunter shooting the deer successfully rise. With the change of scenery comes a change in atmosphere; the refraction of light on the surface of the river not only enhances awareness, it also widens the field of vision, so the hunter realizes that he can easily capture the deer. All these factors help to support his actions.

Until now, the queerats' actions have all been very human-like. That's why Shun predicted that they would try to use the terrain to their advantage. If their nests were in indeed at the top of the hill, then the spot where the hill and flat ground meet would be a logical boundary.

"What do we do?" I asked Shun. I felt like he was only one we could depend on now.

"We have no choice but to split up when we get to the forest."

If we stuck together, we'd be an easy target for the queerats. Splitting up would be hard for all of us, but like Shun said, there was nothing else we could do.

"If they start coming at you from a hidden position, just run as fast as you can. It's all over if they catch you, so try to conserve energy too. Get as far away as you can, then hide. Once you're sure that the coast is clear, go back to the path we took today. We'll meet up where the canoes are hidden."

The chances of all of us meeting up again seemed rather bleak. To begin with, wasn't the idea of splitting up based on the thought that some people would be sacrificed while others escaped?

"And before we reach the forest?" Satoru asked, coming up next to Shun.

I understood at once what he was asking.

The edge of the forest was a good fifty meters away from the foot of the hill. There were no trees or rocks to hide behind, so we would be easy targets.

Maria let out a sob. I couldn't help but realize again the seriousness of the situation we were in. I wrapped my arms around her shaking shoulders and nuzzled my forehead against hers, trying to comfort her.

Before long, the discussion began again in hushed voices.

It was about the enemy's intentions. Were they going to attack here? Were they just making sure we were really leaving?

If we assume that they were going to attack, we would have to make for the forest as fast as we could. In that instant, we would reveal that we didn't have cantus. The act of running away would definitely induce them to attack. In that case, the probability of all five of us making it out alive was impossibly small.

On the other hand, if we bet on the chance that they wouldn't attack, and lost, then no one could save us.

"…no choice but hold out until we're nearly there to watch their reaction," Shun's words had a touch of defiance in them.

"And who gets to determine that?" Satoru said.

"All of our lives are on the line," Shun sighed.

"Let's take a vote."

Because of the subtle dips and rises in the ground, the border between the hill and the open field was ambiguous. The deepening darkness blurred the contours of our surroundings, steeping everything in shadows. We crossed the determined focal point and continued on through the open field, not knowing when an arrow would come whistling toward us.

My breathing became quicker, shallower. My pulse pounded in my temples.

Even though I had to be prepared to run at any moment, my legs felt rubbery, unable to exert any strength.

I turned around quietly and looked at the hill by the weak light of the moon.

The queerats still hadn't moved. They were still watching us from their vantage point halfway up the hill.

That's good, just stay there. We'll be gone soon. No one's threatening you. You know what'll happen if you shoot us, right? If you just let us leave, nothing will happen. But if you harm us, we'll kill all of you. So please. Behave for just a bit longer.

I prayed silently to myself. I turned to face forward again, and stopped.

There were four black silhouettes. One had its hand raised.

"Who's that?" a low voice asked.

"M-me," Mamoru gasped. "I think we should make a run for it, right now."

"What are you talking about? We're going to be fine. Alright? Just a bit more."

Mamoru lowered his hand and we all felt slightly relieved. If three hands went up, that would be a majority. Though in reality, even if we didn't have a majority vote, all it takes is one person to

panic and take off running for the entire plan to be ruined. When the queerats start attacking, we'll all have to run for dear life.

"Saki, you're walking too fast."

Shun's voice pulled me back to reality. Without knowing it, I had broken into a slight jog.

"Oh, sorry." I slowed down, mentally kicking myself for panicking.

"Just a bit farther," Satoru said. "Shun, when we reach the last twenty meters, let's run. It'll take a couple of seconds for them to start shooting. We'll definitely make it to the woods by then."

"…I don't want to run at all," Shun said, sounding hesitant. "If we run, they'll chase after us. Just because we'll be in the forest doesn't mean we'll be out of danger."

"But we can hide in there. If we don't run, maybe they'll…" Mamoru stammered, raising his hand again.

"Hey…behind us! It's like," Maria choked out.

I turned around and felt my heart contract painfully in shock. The queerats were descending the hill.

"They're coming!" Maria screamed, raising her hand. Two votes.

"Wait. Not yet. This doesn't mean they're going to attack," Shun tried to calm them down, but they didn't lower their hands.

Satoru started raising his hand uncertainly.

"Stop!" I said to him. "We're almost there. Just…"

There was a whistling sound. An arrow flew over our heads and embedded itself in the ground near the entrance to the forest.

I knew that signaled the start of battle. Without waiting for a majority vote, we took off as fast as we could.

It was the first time I had ever run like my life depended on it. But no matter how hard I pumped my legs, I didn't seem to be moving forward at all. It was like something out of a nightmare.

Even so, the forest gradually drew closer.

Just a little farther.

As I burst into the woods and started weaving through the trees, I realized how fast I had been running.

"Don't stick together. Spread out and get away!" Shun's voiced echoed through the trees.

I made a sharp right turn and dashed through the undergrowth until I couldn't hear anyone else's voice or footsteps. I was all alone.

The only sound was my own panting. Having run so around so wildly, I had no idea where I was. In any case, I had to keep going until I reached my destination.

Just a while ago I had been with four of my friends. Now I was suddenly alone. The fear of the queerats coming after me, in addition to my uneasiness at being left alone, made my chest tighten painfully. My only companion was the moon, hidden by the trees.

It was hard to breathe. I gasped and wheezed, trying to draw more air into my lungs. My thighs felt heavy, and I was losing sensation below my knees.

I had reached my limit. I wanted to stop and rest.

But if I stopped, I'd probably die.

Just a little more. Keep going for just a little longer.

Right as I thought that, I tripped over something.

I tried to right myself, but my body froze. I was suspended in the air for a moment, then fell heavily to the ground.

I knew I should get up immediately, but my entire body hurt so much I couldn't move. I somehow managed to turn onto my back, and saw the yellow light of the moon, brighter than I had ever seen it before.

The cold ground sucked all the heat from my body through my shirt and backpack. I lay there, unable to do anything but breathe, my chest rising and falling like bellows.

Am I going to die here? The thought came to me all of a sudden. I was still young; death didn't seem real.

"Saki!" a voice called to me from somewhere far away.

Satoru. He was coming closer.

"Saki, are you okay?"

"Satoru…run," I finally managed to choke out.

"Can you move?"

The voice was right next to me. A face appeared over me, looking into mine. Although I couldn't see his expression, it was unmistakably Satoru.

"I don't think so."

"Don't give up. Let's hurry and get out of here," Satoru pulled me up.

With his help, I somehow managed to get back on my feet.

"Can you run?"

I shook my head.

"Let's walk then."

"No…it's too late."

"What are you talking about?"

I looked over Satoru's shoulder. Satoru turned as well. In the darkness were countless glowing eyes. I could faintly hear them breathing.

"We're completely surrounded by queerats."

I was sure that we were going to die right there. But fortunately, I was wrong. The two of us were driven forward at spear-point by a group of queerats. They seemed to still be wary of us, and always kept a distance of at least three meters away. Thanks to that, we weren't tied up or pushed around by them. But their spears were always pointed at us, and a little ways away a group of them had their bows at the ready.

"Did the others escape?" I asked quietly.

"I'm not sure. I lost sight of them soon after we entered the forest."

I wondered if the queerats were going to forbid us to talk, but they didn't seem to care. So I figured this was as good a time as any to ask.

"How in the world did you find me?"

"I saw you ahead while I was running."

Chasing after me defeated the whole point of splitting up, but I didn't have the heart to criticize him.

"The others probably got away."

"Yeah. Probably."

I knew he was just agreeing with me to try to cheer me up, but it worked.

The queerat in the lead signaled us to stop.

Ahead of us was a small clearing. Were they going to kill us here? I closed my eyes. A stick-like object poked me in the chest and my eyes snapped open again.

"Gigigigi….Grrrr!"

A queerat as tall as I was stood in front of me, armored and wielding a long spear. It appeared to be the leader of the group. I rubbed my chest where it had jabbed me. It hadn't penetrated my shirt and I wasn't bleeding. Looks like it had poked me with the butt end of the spear, not the point.

"Saki…!" Satoru rushed toward me, but another queerat stuck out its spear and tripped him.

"I'm fine. Don't move," I shouted.

Of course, I didn't believe that we would be left unharmed if we followed their orders. Rather, at this point I was already halfway resigned to the fact that we were going to be killed.

The queerat in front of me started shouting again in its piercing voice. And for the first time, I got a good look at its face.

Beneath the black helmet glowed cruel, red eyes, and its pig-like snout was the same as the queerats we had met at the canal as well as the one Rijin had killed earlier. But there was one clear difference. Its entire face, from forehead to chin, was covered in scales, like a pinecone.

Although scaly mammals, like pangolins, do exist, they are unheard of in rodents. In addition it was strange to see individuals with and individuals without scales in the same species.

The thought disappeared from my mind as I felt something cold and metallic on my cheek. The spear was pointed at me, moonlight glinting off its head.

Was this the end? As I thought this, the spear was retracted. I was going to be skewered.

The pinecone-faced leader let out a battle cry that sounded like a dying pig. I closed my eyes.

A few seconds later, I opened them again.

Nothing happened. Captain Pinecone was moving toward Satoru, who was being held back by a pair of queerats.

Before I had time to react, Captain Pinecone was thrusting his spear toward Satoru's face. But it suddenly stopped, the point a hair's breadth away from Satoru. It thrust the spear a second time, a third time.

Satoru tried hard to appear unafraid, but his knees gave out and he slumped against the queerats holding his arms. The next instant, the spear grazed his forehead.

"Satoru!" I started toward him without thinking, only to be stopped by a queerat's spear.

"Don't worry, I'm fine," Satoru said.

His forehead was bleeding. The wound looked painful, but shallow. I sighed, relieved that it wasn't a serious injury.

The other queerats under Captain Pinecone looked relieved too. But probably not because of Satoru's wound. It seemed like they hadn't been absolutely certain that we couldn't use our cantus. So they did this as a way to be sure before they took us back to their colony.

Once again, we set off through the forest.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

Satoru shook his head silently. The bleeding hadn't stopped, so Satoru's face was covered in dark streaks of blood.

"What's going to happen to us?"

"We probably won't be killed immediately," he said quietly.

"How do you know?"

"They would've done it a long time ago."

"Are you sure that's not just wishful thinking?"

"Not just that. Before they came into the forest, they shot that whistling arrow, remember? That was probably a warning for us to stop. If they were going to kill us from the start, they wouldn't have done that."

"So why did they capture us?"

"Who knows. But, if today was the first time they were exposed to cantus, then despite being scared they're probably interested in learning more about it, right? We're the only source of information they have, so they won't kill us carelessly."

Satoru's reasoning was probably right. For the time being, we weren't in any danger.

We left the forest, and started up the hill once again. Our fatigue had peaked a long time ago, but the spears pointed at our backs forced us to keep going.

Still, we couldn't help but look at the queerats. What was surprising was that out of the group of twenty or so, only about half of them looked like normal queerats. The other half had striking abnormalities that didn't appear to be birth defects, but rather a purposely-designed variation.

Both the captain and vice-captain were covered in scales, and upon closer inspection, I could see scales on their bodies in between the gaps in their armor in addition to the scales on their face and hands.

In the group of archers were four queerats who had bows twice the size of the other archers', and each had an arm that was disproportionately large, like a fiddler crab. The larger arm, which held the bow, resembled a long club and seemed rather stiff, while the arm that nocked the arrows was shorter with a muscular upper arm. The forearm tapered toward the hand and the fingers appeared to have pairs of hooks on them.

There were also ones with a single long horn on their heads, or with abnormally long limbs, but I couldn't imagine what the uses of these features were.

"What's up with these guys? It's like a monster parade," Satoru said.

"Well, they are queer rats."

"I didn't know that's what the name meant."

It really wasn't funny at all, but somehow this boosted our spirits just a little bit.

As we climbed the hill, the moonlight revealed the path surrounded by the ghostly silhouettes of the trees. But the queerats turned away from the path and slipped through a narrow gap between multiflora rose bushes. We had no choice but to follow, pushing through the thorny branches.

I wonder if these bushes were planted specifically to deter predators from approaching their nest. As I was thinking about this, the winding path suddenly opened up.

At first glance it looked like an empty meadow, but the queerats visible near the base of the big Mongolian oak trees indicated that their nest was there. Tall weeds cleverly camouflaged the entrance, so it seemed like the queerats were appearing out of thin air.

One queerat, conspicuously larger than all the others, made its way forward sluggishly, pushing aside the smaller queerats. It wore a cloak draped over its leather armor and was unmistakably the highest ranked in the colony. But its most distinguishing feature was its protruding, hammer-shaped head.

Captain Pinecone dropped down on all fours and crawled deferentially towards Hammerhead. The two started discussing something. Hammerhead glared at us with its beady eyes while giving orders to Captain Pinecone.

I was afraid that we were going to be led down into the pitch-black tunnels, but instead we were driven away from the nest, into the woods. There was a giant birdcage, two meters across and one and a half meters tall, made out of the vines of multiflora roses wrapped around the branches of the trees.

There didn't appear to be an entrance to the cage, but one area was devoid of branches and only had the stems of the roses stretching from top to bottom. The queerats parted the stems with their spears and ushered us inside. When they withdrew their spears, the stems sprang closed again. It would be impossible to get out without being cut to pieces by the thorns. In addition, a sentry was posted outside, watching us darkly.

The cage wasn't tall enough for us to stand in, so we had no choice but to sit on the cold ground with our backpacks as a cushion. The moonlight was just bright enough for us to barely make out each other's faces.

"It's been a rough day, huh," Satoru said, in a gentler voice than I could ever have imagined him using.

Tears welled up in my eyes and threatened to spill over.

"Seriously, worst day ever. …Satoru, how's your wound?"

"It's perfectly fine. The blood's dried already; it only just nicked the skin," he said, wiggling his ears.

He was the only one in our class who had that talent. I relaxed and gave a small smile. The blood on his forehead made the cut look serious, but as he said, it wasn't really a big deal.

"What do we do now?"

"Anyway, all we can do now is wait to be rescued. If Shun and them make it out okay, they'll alert the town."

How long would we have to wait until the rescuers got here? Just thinking about it was depressing.

We sat pressed against each other in the narrow birdcage.

"It's still watching us, huh."

It's been about an hour since we entered the cage, but the sentry was still glaring suspiciously at us. It met my eyes and turned away, but looked back toward us soon after.

"Ignore it. It's just a stupid queerat," Satoru said, putting his arm around my waist.

"But, somehow…hey, what are you doing?" I directed the second half of my sentence toward Satoru.

"Your nerves are probably all frazzled, right? I'll help you relax," he said, leaning over me stiffly. The light behind him hid his face in shadows, but I could still see his eyes glittering brightly.

"Okay. I'll do it. Just lie back," I put my hand on his chest.

Satoru stopped moving. I felt his heart beating through his T-shirt. I smiled, and slowly pushed him over.

The pale moonlight illuminated his face as I ran the back of my hand gently down his cheek. Satoru closed his eyes, and kept contentedly still, like a pet cat.

When I cupped his face in my hands and kissed his forehead, Satoru buried his face in my chest.

I caressed him gently from his neck to his wrist, to his torso.

Until now, we never had a chance to touch each other like this. But our usual interactions, snapping and teasing each other, were all expressions of love.

Satoru was completely hard now. Until now, I've only had experiences with girls, so I didn't know what to do with a boy. When I touched him through his jeans, I could feel its heat and pulsation through the thick material. What was I supposed to do?

I tried to bide my time by running my hands over Satoru's inner legs, squeezing his butt, but he grabbed my hand and put it on his genitals.

I undid the button and unzipped his jeans. He was so hard that it looked like his boxers were about to rip.

Once again I caressed his most sensitive part. This time, I could see its size and shape much more clearly through the thin material of his boxers. I thought it was interesting that it looked almost alive, reacting to my touch like a little pet.

Suddenly, the false minoshiro's words echoed in my ears.

"When stress among members of a group arise, bonobos will relieve it through intimate sexual contact. Mature males and females engage in sexual intercourse, and immature individuals or individuals of the same sex will rub their genitals together in an imitation of intercourse. This prevents conflicts and maintains order within the group…"

No. We're not monkeys.

I shook my head, trying to drive away unneeded thoughts.

But. There were strict rules in the Code of Ethics regarding sexual acts between boys and girls, almost to the point of being forbidden. But something just one step away from it, that is, contact between two people of the same sex, was allowed, even encouraged. Why is that?

"The first step was to have frequent physical contact. Hand holding, hugging, and cheek-kissing. The second step was to encourage contact between opposite and same sexes from childhood to puberty. The idea was to make it a habit to use sexual play, and the ensuing orgasms, to

dispel tensions between people. And the third step was to encourage free sex among mature humans."

If what the false minoshiro said was true, then all of this was just something created to protect our society…

"What's wrong?" Satoru asked, because I had suddenly stopped moving.

"Nothing, sorry."

"This time, let me do it," he said, groping me.

"W-wait…!"

Satoru probably thought he was being gentle, but he was actually tickling me. I squirmed and threw my head back. Then I felt a pair of eyes drilling into me. The sentry. It stared unblinkingly at us.

No one, adult or children, wants to be watched when they're having an intimate moment with their partner. So when an outsider happens upon a situation like this, the proper thing to do would be to look away and leave as soon as possible.

But then, when the third party isn't human, there isn't such an expectation. Once when Maria and I were spending time together on the Hamasaki sand dunes, Shun's bulldog Subaru was there as well, though I don't remember how that came to happen.

In this case though, the queerat's gaze was different from Subaru's, and felt extremely unpleasant. It obviously didn't understand the meaning of our actions; all its primitive brain could imagine were obscene acts as it looked lewdly at us with, saliva dripping from its mouth.

Since I had stopped moving again, Satoru opened his eyes.

"What now? Stop teasing."

"I'm not. …look," I flicked my eyes in the direction of the sentry.

Satoru clicked his tongue. "Just ignore it."

"I can't."

His fun spoiled, Satoru glared menacingly at the queerat.

"Damn it. That bastard. I'll deal with it."

"Without your cantus?"

Sensing mockery in my words, Satoru's face became sullen. "Even without cantus, humans still have knowledge."

I decided to keep my scathing retort to myself. "…but there's nothing you can do. You can't get out of the cage, and you can't talk to it since it doesn't speak our language."

Satoru thought for a while, then his eyes lit up. I had a bad feeling about this, but kept silent for now. Satoru started rummaging through his backpack.

"What are you looking for?"

"This," he said proudly, pulling out a white bird's egg, no, a haythatcher's fake egg.

"What are you going to do with it?"

When the fake egg is struck, it explodes and what's called a "devil's hand" springs out, emitting a foul smell and covering two to three meters of the surrounding area in feces. Be that as it may, the force of the blast isn't enough to kill. At the most it'll just enrage your enemy.

"Well, just watch."

Satoru shuffled toward the entrance of the cage on his knees, holding out the fake egg to the queerat. This was the first time we had tried to communicate with it, and it appeared extremely wary, waving its spear at us with unnecessary force.

"Hey, don't be so angry. You've been on your feet for a while, so you must be hungry, right? This bittern's egg is really delicious," Satoru coaxed, rolling the egg toward the entrance.

The sentry turned its head, following the egg's path. It hesitated for a moment, then stuck out a paw and caught it.

"Are you stupid? Even queerats know about the fake eggs."

"Really? I don't think so," Satoru sounded nervous and expectant, but also surprisingly confident. "These guys just came over from the mainland, right? Haythatchers seem to be endemic to Kanto, so they might not recognize it."

"Still, it's just going to get covered in poop and be really pissed off. Because, unless it swallows it whole like a snake…"

Satoru gave a small shout of surprise. I turned to see the queerat open its mouth and drop the egg in.

What happened next was cruel and hard to watch.

I was just about to scold Satoru that he shouldn't have done such a horrible thing, but saw that he appeared even more shocked than I was, so I decided not to say anything.

The sentry was no longer moving. It was probably dead. It didn't even have a chance to cry out, so our crime would remain undiscovered for now.

"What now?" I asked softly.

Because of my indecisiveness, it looks like I'm always asking other people for answers. This time, I just wanted Satoru to say something, anything.

"…have to run away," Satoru whispered. "Once they realize we killed this guy, there's no way they're gonna let us live."

"But how do we get out?" I grabbed a rose stem, but jerked my hand back as a thorn pierced my finger.

We would be scratched bloody if we tried to force our way out.

"That's it!" Satoru pointed at the spear lying near the dead sentry.

His arm just barely fit in the gaps between the stems on the cage door. Satoru emptied out his backpack and used one of the shoulder straps to try to lasso the spear. He wasn't very good at it, but eventually managed to get the strap looped around the handle and dragged the spear a little closer.

"Let's switch," I said, seeing the cuts on his arm, but Satoru shook his head, not wanting to give up.

"Got it!"

Though he finally managed to get the spear, his arm was now covered in blood.

Mimicking the queerats, he used the spear as a lever to try to separate the bars of the cage, but just one wasn't enough. He needed two spears to get the opening wide enough.

"I guess we'll have to cut through it."

As he hacked away at the stems, I realized that the spearhead was made of stone, whereas Captain Pinecone's spearhead was made of metal.

"Hurry up, or we'll be found out!" I said anxiously.

"Just a bit more," Satoru said, sawing as quickly as he could without a word of complaint.

He was usually a show-off, sarcastic, and snapped at the smallest criticism, so I was struck by how different he was right now.

Thankfully, the obsidian, or whatever it was that the spearhead was made of, was surprisingly sharp. But it still took Satoru two or three minutes to cut through the stems. We couldn't afford to lose any more time. Satoru twisted the trailing stems around the handle of the spear and pushed them up.

"Hurry! Get out from here."

There was just enough space between the stems, so I got down on all fours and crawled through.

Handing his backpack to me, Satoru got ready. It was hard to hold back the stems and get out of the cage at the same time, but he managed. He was a bit bigger than me though, so the thorns caught him in a few places. At this point, he was covered in wounds. It would probably affect him in the long run.

Crouched low to the ground, we peeked through the trees and saw a large group of queerats tracking Shun's group, but upon straightening up, realized there were only two or three of them. The rest were going in and out of the nest.

"Okay, let's go."

We walked quickly and quietly away from the nest, away from where our canoes were hidden on the beach of Lake Kasumigaura, but we would not be able to escape otherwise. After a couple of meters, we broke into a run.

"Which way are we going?"

"Just keep going straight."

How long has it been since we were captured? The moon was already setting toward the mountains in the distance.

We ran desperately through the dark mountain paths. If we were caught again, I had no doubt that only death would await us.

"Shouldn't you get rid of that?" I asked, panting.

Satoru was still holding on to the spear as if it were the most precious thing in the world.

"It might come in handy again," he answered shortly.

I couldn't help but think about all the bad situations in which a spear would be handy. Especially for two kids who had just lost their cantus and only had this lousy spear for a weapon.

The next forty or fifty minutes passed without event. Even though we were exhausted, we somehow managed to keep going. Fortunately, it didn't seem like anyone was chasing us, but that just made us more nervous.

A mournful melody suddenly came to my mind, along with a verse we had learned in Harmony School.

Home gets farther away. Farther away.
Turn back along the road. Turn back.

"How long are we going to go this way?" I was almost at my limit.

"We just have to get away from their nest."

The only thing Satoru was thinking about were queerats coming after us.

"We're heading west, right? If we keep going, we'll be going farther and farther from Lake Kasumigaura."

"But we can't go back. Until we find a detour that'll take us around, we'll have to keep going this way."

"But all these paths are straight. Why don't we go off the path and head back?"

"If you go into the forest in the middle of the night, you're just going to get lost. You can't tell which way you're going and you might end up where you started," Satoru shivered.

"But if we keep going down these paths, it'll be easy for them to find us."

"That's why I'm trying to put as much distance between us as possible."

Our ideas were completely opposite to each other. Satoru showed no sign slackening his pace, so I had no choice but to follow.

But he suddenly came to a halt.

"What's wrong?"

Satoru put a hand to his lips and motioned for me to be quiet. He crouched down and looked intensely ahead.

I followed his gaze. I didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

I was just about to say something when I heard a rustling sound in the thickets ahead.

We froze.

Twenty, thirty meters ahead, on both sides of the path were shadows that resembled small humans. Some of them held what looked like spears or swords.

"Queerats…"

The despair was overwhelming. Grasping his crude spear firmly, Satoru took a step forward.

3

There were six queerats in all. They came forward slowly.

"Satoru, get rid of the spear," I whispered in as normal a voice as possible. "They'll kill us if we resist."

Satoru shook his head, "They'll kill us anyway. Listen, run into the forest while I fight them."

"That's ridiculous. It's impossible to get away, but if we go quietly, they might not kill us right away. We can wait for help."

"No. They won't make it," Satoru replied stubbornly. "And I don't want to be locked up in a cage again."

"Satoru! Please, don't be rash."

The six queerats stopped four or five meters away. Were they still on guard against us? That's kind of strange.

"…wait a second," I said, holding back Satoru's spear-arm.

"Don't get in my way."

"I'm not…look, they're not the same ones as before."

"Huh?" Satoru replied dubiously.

Just when I thought the queerats would drop their spears, they suddenly all fell to their knees before us.

"What?" Satoru shouted.

I just stared with my mouth agape.

"Kikikiki grrr…k-gods," the queerat in the center raised its head and let out strange sounds that resembled speech. "sssh…Robber☆Flyy colony…∈∂Å. Ground Spider…★brrr…danger!"

I have no clue what it's saying. But I saw something that looked like tattoos on their foreheads.

"We're saved! It's a colony that obeys humans!" I said, my knees going weak with relief.

Satoru still looked doubtful, but approached the queerats resolutely, if somewhat nervously, stopping about three meters away and looking at their tattoos.

"'Salt 604', huh. Does that mean 'Robber Fly' colony?"*

* The first kanji in Robber Fly (塩屋虻) means 'salt'

"Kikikikiki…Robber☆Flyy! Robber☆Flyy!" the queerat who could somewhat speak replied to Satoru's words, nodding exaggeratedly like a longheaded locust. "Gro ☆ Spider ★ …danger…Ground Spider★danger!"

We learned later that at that time, the Department of Health had already acknowledged the existence of the foreign colony and had named it "Ground Spider". But compared to another foreign colony that had come over from the peninsula, called "Millipede", the Ground Spiders were considered a mild group and not much trouble. This turned out to be an underestimation.

Incidentally, during the Yamato period in ancient Japan (different from the New Yamato period during the Holy Cherry Blossom Empire), "ground spider" was a derogatory term that referred to the indigenous Jomon people. After all this time, the fact that it's now used as a name for a queerat colony, and a foreign colony at that, speaks to the ironic nature of history.

Anyway, we were led through the dark forest by the six queerats from the Robber Fly colony.

"We're in a bad situation again," Satoru sighed, looking grave.

"How come? We've been rescued. And these guys definitely won't take us captive."

"True, but I'm talking about now."

"Now?"

Satoru gave me a pitiful look, "Why do you think queerats worship humans as gods? Isn't it because we have cantus? They're only being subservient right now because they believe we have that power, but what do you think they'll do if they find out we've lost it?"

Satoru talked quietly, hanging back. Maybe he was afraid of the queerats ahead overhearing.

"You're over thinking it." I was a little uneasy, but still felt like I should refute him somehow. "The Robber Fly colony is under our control, right? If they were to do something to us, and other people found out, the colony would be exterminated. They know that well. So they shouldn't have any incentive to hurt us."

"You can never tell what their motives are. Queerats may think like us sometimes, but they're still rodents after all," Satoru said, suddenly sounding much older than his years. "Anyway, we can't be careless. I definitely won't let them know we can't use our cantus. You be careful too, Saki."

How in the world am I supposed to be careful, I wanted to ask, but this wasn't the time to argue.

But as we walked through the pathless forest, my uneasiness increased.

Would we be able to fool the Robber Fly colony? This new worry replaced my previous fear of the Ground Spiders, growing exponentially as time wore on.

How much more do I have to walk? Suddenly, one queerat turned around and shouted something, but I was so exhausted my mind was too hazy to comprehend anything.

"What did it say?"

"I didn't really hear, but it was probably something about having arrived."

Satoru's words caused a ripple of anxiety to run through me.

Through a gap in the bushes ahead, a new queerat appeared. Its appearance was distinctively different from the six that we had been traveling with. A good size bigger than the others, it was wearing a helmet with a hoe-shaped crest and scaled metal ring mail. It was probably the same rank as Captain Pinecone from the Ground Spiders, or maybe even higher.

For a few moments, Helmet stood listening to the report from one of the queerats, then approached us carefully.

"Gods, welcome," he said in astonishingly fluent Japanese, sweeping off its helmet. "I am a messenger for the Robber Fly Colony. ΘΞ%∞★∀∂ is my name."

His name was a series of complicated, high-pitched noises.

"But Squealer is probably easier, so please call me that."

"Then, Squealer," Satoru says calmly, "We've lost our way back to camp. We would be thankful if you would take us to the shore of Lake Kasumigaura. After that we'll be fine."

"I understand," Squealer responded quickly, and we went weak with relief. "However, it will be difficult to do so immediately."

"Why's that?" I asked without thinking. "Because it's dark? Or…"

"My sense of smell is quite developed; I could move through the forest at night without any impediments. If you are not tired and wish to leave now, I will gladly show you the way," Squealer answered respectfully. "However, this area is currently very dangerous. Because the foreign Ground Spider colony invaded our lands, we've been on high alert. A few days ago, they declared war on us, a native colony. Perhaps you've encountered them on the way here?"

I was about to reply when I saw Satoru's expression.

"Nope, haven't seen them," he said with a straight face.

I thought I saw Squealer glance at the wound on Satoru's forehead, but it was probably just my imagination.

"That's fortunate. The Ground Spiders are a lawless group who would probably attempt to capture the gods out of ignorance of their own positions. Of course, to the gods dealing with them with cantus is nothing more than child's play, but they're not past doing cowardly things like ambushing others with poisoned arrows."

He scrunched up his already wrinkled snout, spitting in anger.

"I apologize for my outburst. We've put enormous effort into our defense, but we are not a strong group to begin with, so that is how we ended up in this position."

"You mean, you're losing?" I asked.

As if he had been waiting for the question, Squealer went on, "The situation is not so simple. I don't know about a big colony like the Giant Hornets, but the Robber Flies only have seven hundred members. In comparison, the Ground Spiders have an estimated population of at least four thousand."

I shuddered. Before he died, Rijin had "exterminated" at most a thousand of them. It had been overly optimistic to think of that as an annihilation of their group. There could possibly still be three thousand queerats remaining.

"Yesterday, we dispatched special envoys to three neighboring colonies requesting assistance, but it will take some time before they arrive."

"Then, you'll be defenseless if you're attacked right now?" I blurted out without thinking.

Squealer looked at me suspiciously and I realized my mistake. A human with cantus wouldn't be worried no matter how many queerats came after them.

"Yeah, what would you have done if we hadn't arrived?" Satoru added without a moment's delay, a skill he had perfected from having to dig himself out of his bluffs all the time.

"I am deeply touched by your concern," Squealer bowed deeply. "However, our battles among colonies are unique, and even though the difference between our powers is considerable, it's too early to jump to conclusions."

"What do you mean?"

"Seeing is believing, as the saying goes. I will show you right now, so please follow me," Squealer backed away with his head bowed. It seemed to be the sort of behavior queerats did when facing another queerat of higher status.

As we left the thickets, our surroundings opened up. The moon had already set, but I could see all the way across the clearing by starlight. It was dotted with towers that looked like anthills.

"Is this the Robber Fly colony's nest?" I asked.

Squealer shook his head, "Our nest is where the queen lives, still quite a ways from here. This is one of our lines of defense against the Ground Spider's assault."

"Lines of defense?"

"Bunkers, trenches, slurry walls, tunnels, all used for defense. …Gods, could you possibly be interested in strategy board games like Shogi and Go?"

The question caught me off guard, "Well, I suppose. We learned both in school."

To be honest, I thought they were fun at first, but quickly lost interest, so I'm still a basic level. The biggest reason I gave up was that there were always a couple people I couldn't win against. One of them was Shun, which was understandable, but every time I saw Satoru's triumphant face, I couldn't keep going.

"Then this explanation may be better. We β★ë◎Å, I mean, queerat colonies fight each other in a style closer to that used in Go than in Shogi."

I wondered vaguely why he used the word "queerat".

Squealer began explaining the power struggles between queerats in a style reminiscent of the false minoshiro.

Queerats are descendants of the troglodytic naked mole rats from East Africa, living mainly in narrow underground tunnels. Even after humans helped to change their physique and raised their intelligence so that they could build their own culture, their basic societal structures are still the same. The dwellings are more or less vertical pits, with numerous branches to provide escape to the surface in case of floods. There are also horizontal tunnels running between the pits for transportation without having to go to the surface.

"For us, fighting above ground is a relatively new development. It's obvious that being aboveground provides better maneuverability than being underground does, no matter how much armor you are wearing. That said, I don't know how the other aboveground fighters feel, but I believe that in terms of discerning the opponent's position, advancing aboveground is pointless."

"Why?" asked Satoru.

"The β★ë◎Å …our comrades underground can use sounds and vibrations to detect the position of the armies aboveground. At the same time, those aboveground cannot detect enemies

beneath them. Therefore, if we collapse the ground from underneath, they will fall onto our spears and be killed without any means to retaliate."

Perhaps they've already used that tactic many times. Humans and queerats alike do not learn their lessons unless a sufficient amount of blood is shed in the process.

"In other words, it's always more advantageous to be on the defensive," Satoru said, looking self-satisfied.

"Precisely. The attackers have no choice but to travel underground, but even then the defense can still ascertain their positions beforehand and build up blockades, dig tunnels from above and drop heavy stones down on their heads, and set other traps. In other words, battling underground is more difficult for the offense."

"Then what do you do?" I asked.

"The usual pattern is that after an endless stalemate, the offense has to cut its losses and retreat. But then the ingenious strategist, Ж◎∞Σ∴…Ioki appeared. Ioki received a book from the gods and was inspired; single-handedly creating a system for capturing entire colonies."

"What book was it?" Satoru asked, his brows furrowed.

Why in the world was such a dangerous book not banned, but in the hands of the queerats of all things?

"Unfortunately, the holy book no longer exists. Only the title *Introduction to Go for Three Year-Olds* is passed down to this day."

We glanced at each other. We've both seen that book in the recreation room at Harmony School.

"Ioki's strategies are based on Go. First, aboveground troops are dispatched to the desired locations to dig a ditch and hold their position. Then communication lines are set up between bases and a vantage point. Underground tunnels are created connecting the bases and the front line. In this way, the bases connect to the front lines that connect to the surface, increasing the territory under our control. The final goal is to trap the enemy in a small area, and for the defense to have a secure escape route. Once the enemy is locked in, we can cut off their food and water supply. In order to do that, we have to build bases in between the enemy's bases, intercept their communication and set up our own. This is all, according to Go, things you must do in order to effectively trap the enemy, and then you can begin close-combat."

I looked out over the clearing again. This time, the anthill-like towers appeared to be arranged purposefully.

"Ioki brought about a tactical revolution that spread amongst the colonies in the blink of an eye. Colonies that were thought to be impregnable fell one after the other, largely reducing their influence. Colonies that adopted this new way of thinking quickly rose to power while those that held on to the old ways were eliminated."

"What happened to Ioki after?"

I was surprised at myself for being so interested in the tale of the queerat hero. Could Ioki, praised as the most influential figure, be the cornerstone of the Giant Hornet colony's prosperity? Or maybe Squealer's passionate tale was because Ioki is the ancestor who rebuilt the Robber Fly colony.

"Ioki lost his life in battle," Squealer said sadly. "He was born in the Mayfly colony, a weak colony with around four hundred members. Because of this, he often had to be in the front lines to lead the battle. During a fight with a neighboring colony, the front line reached the enemy's bridgehead and a fierce battle broke out. Whose communication lines would be preserved and whose would be cut off depended on the outcome of the battle. Ioki was well aware of this, and realized that by sacrificing one of his bases he would be able to destroy the enemy's lines. But there was one problem. The base that had to be sacrificed was the one he was currently in."

Satoru sighed.

"Ioki sacrificed his own troop. They were surrounded by the enemy, but Ioki and six of his comrades fought bravely until, as he predicted, they were killed. Drunk on their victory, the enemy tried to turn on the rest of the troops only to realize that their group had been divided in two, cutting off all communications. They were trapped in their own vantage point and all their escape routes were lost. For half the troop, the supply line was cut off so they would die under siege. The Mayfly colony achieved a glorious victory."

We were mesmerized by Squealer's story. It felt like we were listening to the false minoshiro telling us about history, even though the two of them sounded nothing alike.

"However, before they even had time to savor the intoxicating taste of victory, the Mayfly colony was destroyed," Squealer said sadly, lamenting the colony that had disappeared off the stage of history leaving only a fleeting glow. "Since it was such a small colony, once the Mayfly colony lost Ioki as its trump card, it quickly became fodder for the neighboring groups. Even so, if the old ways of war had not changed, they might have been able to hold out just defending themselves. Ironically, it was through Ioki's own strategy that the Mayfly colony was starved to the point that they had no alternative but to surrender unconditionally."

"What happens to the queerats of the losing colony?" I asked.

It couldn't be that they would all be massacred?

"The queen is executed and the rest of the members become slaves. As long as they live they are treated as less than scum, and when they die they are left out to rot and fertilize the fields."

We were silent. When I think about it now, this too was probably part of Squealer's plan. Satoru mouthed something silently. It looked like he was saying, "Ants…"

Of course, ants. On one side, queerats show a disposition similar to humans, but on the other, they also have the cruelty of social insects. The purpose for their wars on other colonies was the same as the amazon ants' invasion of other anthills–to acquire laborers.

"…to be honest, there is a reason I've been telling you about all this," Squealer sat on the ground looking very dignified. "In the past few days of battling with the Ground Spiders, we have lost all the bases that allow access to the outside world. The special envoys we sent to request help from neighboring colonies have probably been caught and executed. In other words, it is a matter of life and death for our colony right now. The arrival of the young gods must be a sign from heaven that we will be saved from destruction. Just like Buddha returning to life from hell."

Satoru gave me a fleeting look. The conversation was heading in the direction we least wanted it to go.

"I am fully aware that asking the gods to be involved in our lowly affairs is pure insolence. But I must ask for you to save our colony. Please bring down the hammer of vengeance upon these heretic Ground Spiders who fear not even the gods."

Satoru cleared his throat, "We'd like very much to help you, but we can't decide these things on our own."

"Why not? With just one thought, you could destroy them all."

Satoru chose his words carefully, "Queerats are a protected species so we can't kill them arbitrarily. We have to apply for extermination of harmful wildlife at the town hall and with the Department of Health."

"I understand, " Squealer made a last-ditch effort, "but as it stands, we will inevitably be eliminated. Please have mercy. You don't need to kill them all. Just a modest attack to break their siege on us, after that we will find a way. Please…"

As Squealer was about to speak again, a messenger appeared and whispered in its ear. His attitude changed completely and he listened haughtily to the messenger. Eventually, he turned back toward us with a slightly confused look.

"I understand. It is late now, so I will ask again tomorrow morning. The two of you must be tired, but will you please meet our queen before you rest?"

"The queen?"

I considered it. On one hand, I wanted to see a queerat queen, but on the other, it was almost daybreak and so much had happened in the past twenty-four hours that I was completely exhausted.

"The queen is in a nearby bunker. She would be very delighted to meet the gods."

"Alright, we'll see her for a bit. But everything else waits until tomorrow," Satoru said, suppressing a yawn.

We followed Squealer through the field. We stopped in front of a particularly large anthill-shaped tower, but I didn't see the entrance anywhere.

"If you please. It looks dirty, but this is the entrance," Squealer parted the dry grass, revealing a hole about a meter across.

"What? You go in through here?" I was filled with trepidation.

"It would be better if the queen could come up and meet us," Satoru said, also sounding a little unsettled.

"I'm deeply sorry. But the tunnel is only big enough for the soldiers, the queen would not be able to exit through here. She is waiting in the hall below."

Well, we have no choice. It would be a hassle to refuse an audience with the queen now, and since we didn't have cantus anymore, I didn't want to start a fight.

Satoru came in after me. It was considerably colder than it had been outside. The entrance was smooth and daubed with clay, and the tunnel itself was made of compact dirt mixed with dried grass, supposedly to prevent slippage. I was afraid I would fall down the vertical shaft, but thanks to the two queerats below us, the climb was easy. The queerats hung onto the walls of the tunnel and slowed our descent like fluffy cushions. The two of us realized that it would be pointless trying gain purchase on the vertical walls, so we basically had to climb down on the queerats' shoulders.

About twenty or thirty meters later, the tunnel suddenly opened up. We stood up and looked around, but it was too dark to tell how big the cavern was. The stench of mold and animals reached my nostrils, making my hair stand on end.

"Please wait a moment," Squealer said from behind us.

Turning around, we saw only his eyes glittering in the darkness. I knew that wild animals had luminous eyes, but I couldn't shake off the unpleasant feeling I got from seeing them.

Squealer struck a flint and lit a small torch. The light blinded me for a second. Once again, I realized how reassuring it was to have light.

"This way."

I thought we were in a huge hall, but the light revealed it to be no bigger than a six tatami room. There were three horizontal tunnels going in different directions. Squealer led the way with the torch. The queerats walking upright cast strange, wavering shadows on the walls of the room.

"Please watch your head."

The ceiling gradually lowered as the tunnel widened. The queerats probably usually ran through here on all fours.

As we walked through the dark underground with only the torch for light, a strange, unreal feeling came over me. I couldn't quite believe I was here.

On the other hand, we became aware of an overwhelmingly realistic presence. It was the smell that had assaulted us earlier. The tunnel was filled with the odor of queerats and as we went deeper, the smell became stronger. It was the smell Squealer and the other soldiers had, but layered with another stench closer to that of decay. Moreover, it was so strong that it was almost choking me.

Next, a complex series of low sounds caught our attention. Listening closely, it sounded like a pair of bellows, with sounds of distant thunder mixed in. Irregular vibrations rumbled through the walls of the tunnel. Like something extremely heavy was crawling around…

I could feel the vibrations under my feet. My body seized up in fear, but I didn't tell Satoru that I wanted to go back. If I showed weakness in front of Squealer, who knows what might happen later.

"How much farther?" Satoru tried to act calm, but his voice shook a little.

"It's just over there."

He wasn't lying. Less than twenty meters later, the tunnel curved broadly to the right. Squealer fell prostrate and started crying out in a high-pitched voice.

The response was an earth-shattering growl. A low frequency wave rippled through our bodies like a strong wind.

"The queen is honored to meet you," Squealer said.

Satoru looked like he wanted to say something but couldn't get the words out.

"…the honor is ours. We are delighted to be in your presence. Tell her that," I replied.

Squealer nodded and resumed his squeaking report to the queen.

Suddenly, the queen started speaking in human language, startling us.

"Grrrr…G-od-s ★Θ. Plea-se…∫∆θ…he-ere."

Her voice was a low rumble mixed with the strange creak you hear when you grind your teeth, but somehow I understood that she was inviting us in.

We looked at each other, then started forward slowly around the bend. The disgusting smell intensified until it was almost unbearable.

Squealer stopped at the bend, holding the torch. The light shining from behind made it hard to make out the queen's appearance. However, from its silhouette and the intense heat it gave off, I could tell that the creature crouched there was of abnormal size.

"★☆…gagaga! □■! …◇◆!"

A gust of hot air washed over us. I instinctively turn my face away, but the sounds that next reached my ears surprised me again.

"Ggg…g-od-s. Welcome. Very-honored."

The queen was speaking to us in falsetto so that the range of her voice was audible to humans. What was even more surprising was that the voice was unmistakably female.

For about five minutes after that, we talked with the queen. Unfortunately, I can't remember anything about our conversations. Maybe because we were extremely tired and anxious, or maybe because what happened later was even more dramatic.

The catalyst was something trivial. The queen apologized for making us stand so long and called for two queerats to act as chairs even after we declined the offer politely. Squealer, still holding the torch, came along with the two queerats.

The bright flame of the torch lit up the cavern, and the queen.

Because the queen's voice had been unexpectedly gentle throughout the conversation, our initial fear had abated somewhat. That's why we were doubly shocked when we saw her actual appearance.

My first impression of her was of a giant hornworm with four short legs and a tail.

Pale, sickly skin from lack of sunlight and rings of wrinkles encircling her body made the resemblance all the stronger. But the defining difference was her face. Half of the giant head was covered in brown spots, though they would probably be red under the sun. Her eyes were tiny beads buried under layers of skin, and her sharp, chisel-shaped teeth were hidden behind strong, thick jaws. Around her neck was a necklace of crimson almandine, glowing fluorite, beryl, and cordierite sparkling in the light.

Her appearance exposed, the queen roared and charged. We flinched, but she was aiming for something off to the side.

She caught Squealer in her mouth and lifted him easily into the air, shaking him violently from side to side. Squealer shrieked and dropped the torch. The cavern was plunged into darkness. I could hear the queen's angry growls punctuated by Squealer's intermittent screams, and the two queerats shivering in a corner, scratching at the dirt with their claws.

"Queen, wait," I mustered up all my courage and spoke. "Don't kill Squealer! He didn't do it on purpose."

Satoru squeezed my arm. It was a risky venture trying to placate the raging queen. But if a human god didn't intervene in this kind of situation, it might arouse suspicion.

The queen was unresponsive for a moment, then casually dropped Squealer. Then she deftly changed directions (it was still pitch black, so I felt instead of seeing her movements), slipped by us and disappeared into the depths of the cavern.

Squealer lay trembling for a while, then gathered himself and turned toward us.

"Thank you for intervening to save my life."

"That surprised us," Satoru said hoarsely after a pause.

"But the queen never intended to kill you, did she?" I asked.

Squealer didn't answer.

"…Gods, you must be tired. I will prepare sleeping quarters, so please rest well tonight." Squealer picked up the torch and lit it again.

I looked at the chain mail he was wearing and shuddered unintentionally. Metal links had been bitten off and the leather armor underneath had large holes from which blood was seeping out. Squealer was obviously wounded, but was doing his best not to show pain in front of us.

"It's definitely weird. There's something strange about the queen," Satoru whispered in my ear on the way to our sleeping quarters. "Be careful. You never know what'll happen if you piss her off."

They had just managed to avoid a malicious foreign colony, only to go home to the rule of an insane queen.

Why was the queen so enraged anyway? Even with that kind of appearance, talking to her was like talking to another female, so it wasn't unpleasant. Unless it was that she didn't want us to see her at all?

But I was too sleepy to care anymore.

We were shown to a plain dirt room. It was a little chilly inside, but the ground was spread with dry straw that was unexpectedly comfortable. We lay down inside and fell asleep in a second.

My eyes snapped open.

I couldn't tell what time it was since everything was pitch black, but I couldn't have been asleep for more than an hour.

My body still felt heavy with fatigue. But I had a feeling that I should get up. Some strange warning in the back of my mind.

"Satoru…Satoru!"

I shook him, but he showed no signs of waking up. I guess that's understandable. When I touched Satoru's face, I could still feel the dried blood caked on his skin. There hadn't been time to clean it properly before we fell asleep.

"Satoru! Wake up!"

Although I felt sorry for him, there wasn't time for me to wake him up gently. I covered his mouth and nose with my hands.

Satoru started squirming and flailing, grabbing at my hands to stop me from suffocating him.

"What do you want…let me sleep."

"No. Get up now. Understand? There's danger."

Satoru opened his eyes reluctantly, but still seemed half asleep. He made no move to get up.

"What danger…?"

"Just a feeling. Something bad is coming."

"What's bad?"

I didn't answer. Satoru looked confused. After a moment of silence, he turned around with a "goodnight" and went back to sleep.

"Satoru. I know you're tired, but if you don't get up now, you might never get up again."

Satoru rubbed his head, "What are you talking about? Did you have a nightmare?"

"It's not a nightmare. Or a premonition. Your mind processes the things that happen during the day while you sleep. And now, mine is saying that something dangerous is coming."

"Fine, then let's hear what kind of danger it is. It's all organized and clear, right?"

I crossed my arms and thought. I felt like I was on the brink of understanding. Something was off. We were all overlooking some unexpected hazard.

"…we believed Squealer's story too easily, I think."

"You mean he's lying about something?" Satoru finally looked like he was starting to wake up.

"Not really. Of course, he might not have been completely honest, but I think most of what he said was true. Squealer himself probably doesn't realize it either. That's what I think. But that's probably the most dangerous thing."

As I spoke, the warning in my head began to take on a solid form.

"An attack. I'm sure of it. Tonight. Probably right before dawn, when our forces are weakest, the Ground Spiders are going to attack."

"It can't be. Remember what Squealer said? Queerat wars follow the rules of Go."

"That's their assumption. Think about it. The Ground Spiders are wild and foreign. Why would they follow Ioki's military strategies?"

"But if they raid the tunnels to capture us, they would be following the same tactics as ours."

"Sure, that sort of maneuver is probably universal among queerats. But the Ground spiders might come up with another strategy."

"I guess that's not impossible…" Satoru sighed, as if he wanted to say that I was just being overly anxious and that there was nothing concrete to base my theory on.

"That's it!" I shouted, "I finally figured out that strange feeling I couldn't put my finger on."

"Before you say anything, remember that time when Rijin killed the Ground Spiders. They weren't fighting underground, right? They met us aboveground," Satoru said quickly. He was finally fully awake now.

"That's because he buried them alive earlier. They must have realized that it was useless to hide underground."

"But that was their first time dealing with cantus, right? How did they come up with a new strategy so quickly?"

"They knew they had a disadvantage, so they tried to drive us off with sheer numbers."

"That's what I think too. But once the fighting actually started, shouldn't they have tried to hide underground? But instead they fired a shot right at us. Because that's the way they fight."

"But capturing an underground colony by attacking from above…"

"There has to be another way. One that's faster than establishing a base and sealing off your opponent." Satoru fell silent. "…if what you say is right, now that they know about cantus, they must have realized that they have no other option but to launch a surprise attack."

Even in the darkness, I could sense him shake his head despondently.

"That's not all. Even if the Robber Fly colony has powerful humans on their side, the Ground Spiders would have learned from the fight with Rijin that it's still possible to kill humans with a surprise attack. ."

An ominous chill was creeping up my back, becoming stronger by the second.

There might not be much time left.

4

"Let's run away," Satoru said.

"To where?"

"Anywhere, as long as we get away from this nest," Satoru stood up and made to look outside the sleeping area. "Saki, do you remember? The path we took here was pretty complicated."

"Yeah, maybe. My memory is a little hazy, so I'm not too sure…"

I tried to recall the sequence of turns from the queen's hall to where we were now.

"I can't. I know we went left in the very beginning, but after that the directions are all mixed up."

My sense of direction wasn't the best to begin with. It's not so bad when I can repeat the same route multiple times, but even then if I have to reverse the directions in my head, I still get confused.

Satoru crossed his arms, trying his hardest to dig out the memory of the way we took.

"There weren't many splits in the road. The most was a three-forked path. The first split, we took a left, then a right, after that…what was it?"

"There's one thing I remember. The path sloped a little downward the entire way here. "

I remember because it felt like we were being led to the underworld.

"Oh really? I see…we didn't go uphill even once?" Satoru grabbed my hand. "Then let's just keep going up. If the path starts slanting down, we'll just go back to the previous intersection and choose the other path."

"But not all paths that slope up are the right ones, right?" I brought up the obvious flaw in the plan.

"That's true, but even if it's not the path we originally took, if it goes up, it'll eventually reach the surface, right?"

Is it okay to be that careless? I was starting to have some doubts about Satoru's judgment. Would it even be possible to retrace our path in the dark? Maybe if we had a rope or something. Even Theseus had Ariadne's thread to guide him through the Minotaur's labyrinth.

"Hey, can't we call the queerats and tell them we want to go outside? Because, if we get lost…"

Satoru leaned in close to me. "We can't explain to them why we want to leave, right? And we can't predict how they'll react if they find out we don't have cantus."

Listening carefully, I didn't sense any queerats nearby. It seemed like dawn was the period when their activity was lowest. But the tunnels outside were even darker than the room we were in, like they were submerged in ink. I couldn't find the courage to step out of the room.

"Hey, isn't this kind of weird?" I said.

Satoru made an impatient noise. "Nothing's strange. What's strange?"

"Why is it brighter inside the room than outside?"

He stopped suddenly, looking surprised. That's right. It was barely perceptible, but inside the room, I could see movement. But the tunnel leading from the room was pitch black.

"You're right. …I see. There must be a source of light somewhere!"

We looked around, but didn't find anything.

Satoru was still holding on to the spear he had taken from the Ground Spiders like it was the most important thing in the world. After ascertaining my position, he started poking around the room with the spear. As he did so, a little pinprick of light glimmered on the spearhead.

"What was that?"

I walked slowly toward the depths of the room. There seemed to be weak light coming from above. I looked up and gasped.

There was a huge notch cut out of the ceiling, through which I could see the stars shining high in the sky.

"Outside? Does this lead aboveground?"

"No, it doesn't. …those aren't stars," Satoru whispered disbelievingly. "They look like stars, but they're not twinkling at all. What the hell is it?"

Satoru thrust his spear at the emerald green flecks of light. I thought he couldn't possibly reach them, but surprisingly, the spear easily touched the ceiling, and the lights quivered.

He drew back the spear slowly. I thought some of the spot of light would come with it, but instead strings of thick liquid dripped from the tip.

Satoru touched it with his finger. "It's all sticky. Wanna feel it?"

I shook my head.

What were glowing on the ceiling were glowworms that had been domesticated by the queerats.

Evidence of glowworms dating back to ancient times has been found in caves in Australia and New Zealand. Although they're called worms, they're more closely related to flies and mosquitoes. The larvae nest on the ceiling, using sticky balls of mucus to trap other insects for food. The light they produce is used to attract prey, but also creates the impression of a galaxy of green stars as it bounces off the balls of mucus.

Glowworms originally did not exist in the Japanese archipelago, but were imported as fishing bait shortly before the collapse of the ancient civilization. A number of them survived and were modified by the queerats to be used as chandeliers in their reception halls.

Satoru stuck the spear in the ceiling again to collect more of the mucus and figure out which part were the insects. Then after a short discussion, I climbed onto his shoulders to collect more. Since I was lighter, I had no choice but to be on top, touching the nasty green glowing bugs.

He took the bugs and stuck them onto the spear (using their own sticky excretions). Maybe it was thanks to the queerats selectively breeding the bugs that they never stopped glowing even when they were handled so roughly.

"Alright, let's go," Satoru said decisively, starting toward the exit.

We shouldered our backpacks, grasped each other's hands, and guided only by the light of the glowing bugs, stepped out into the darkness.

Thinking back on it even now, it was such a strange journey.

The only light came from the faint ghostly glow on the tip of the spear. Beyond that little circle of light, we couldn't even see our own hands. I tried looking off to the side and waving my hand in front of my face, but all I could make out was a dark shadow. In order to see where we were going, we had to walk side by side. The tunnel was just wide enough for that, and I was even thankful that it was so narrow because now part of us would be constantly touching the walls.

"Are we ascending now?" Satoru said every now and then.

Whenever he asked, I answered with "yeah," or "I don't know," or "who knows?". No matter how I responded, it's not like the situation was going to change.

The light sometimes revealed a two or three-way fork in the road. These splits were always easily visible thanks to the luminous moss growing near them.

Although luminous moss glows, it's not through the same mechanism as the glowworms. In order to achieve photosynthesis in the dark tunnels, they use lens-like cells to store and give off light.

Queerats should be able to run around these tunnels relying only on their sense of touch and smell. But as they became more civilized, they needed a more efficient way to move around, so they started using the natural properties of things around them.

We continued walking silently. Since we didn't meet a single queerat, I assumed that this was probably their resting period. At first I thought this was fortunate for us, but as time went on, things started looking a little foreboding.

"Hey, haven't we been walking for a while now?" I asked Satoru.

"Yeah."

"Maybe this really is the wrong way?"

We stopped. If we were wrong, then where were we? I thought back over the path we took.

"This doesn't make sense. I've been remembering as we walked, how many, and which turns we took. So I don't think this is the wrong path…"

"But I still think we went wrong somewhere. It shouldn't be taking this long."

"I guess so. Let's go back and try again."

We turned around and headed back the way we came. It was depressing to be heading down deeper into the tunnels again, but we didn't have a choice. However, within a few moments, a surprising scene appeared.

"A fork in the road!" I breathed.

"I don't believe it. That wasn't there earlier, was it?"

Since I had been memorizing the path as we walked, I was completely sure of my answer.

"…it wasn't."

Satoru started examining the dirt around the path

"Hm…I get it! Damn it," he growled suddenly, making me jump.

"What's wrong?"

"I see. That's possible too. But in such a short amount of time…" he sighed deeply.

"What are you talking about? Hey, what's going on?"

"The dirt around here is fresh…"

I felt the blood drain from my face as I understood.

Queerats are always building new tunnels and changing the shape of their nests. In other words, there's no guarantee that the path we took hadn't changed from the time we arrived in our room until now.

"We thought we were fine since there was no activity going on. But it seems like the tunnel digging goes on despite that. They're probably preparing the nest for war right now. I'm guessing that right after we had gone through the tunnel, they dug through from somewhere else, creating this split."

Satoru threw the clod of dirt angrily against the wall.

"So we're…"

"Yeah, we're lost."

If I could see Satoru's face right now, I'm sure it would be full of misery and unspilled tears.

We wandered aimlessly through the dark tunnels. Although in reality we were probably only there for about half an hour, the stress of walking through near-absolute darkness in addition to being in an extremely cramped space made it seem like an eternity. Although we were lightly dressed and the air was cold enough to raise goosebumps, I was drenched in sweat.

With vulgar words that we rarely used, we cursed our bad luck, complained to the gods, and cried uncontrollably, but we never let go of each other, and continued to walk.

Then gradually, our minds fell into disarray.

For me, the first sign was auditory hallucinations.

I heard a disembodied voice call "Saki, Saki."

"Did you say something?" I would ask Satoru, and sometimes an annoying voice would answer from above my head, "No."

"Saki. Saki."

I heard it clearly this time.

"Saki. Where are you? Hurry and come back."

My father's voice.

"Dad. Dad!" I shouted. "Help. I'm lost."

"Saki. Listen. Never go outside the Holy Barrier. There's a strong force inside the barrier so it's safe, but the moment you take a step outside, there's no cantus to protect you."

"I know. But I can't go back. I can't find the way back."

"Saki. Saki. Be careful of the queerats. They worship people with cantus as gods and will obey them unfailingly. But we don't know how they'll behave toward children without cantus. That's why we have to keep them away from children as much as possible."

"…Dad."

"Hey, what are you saying? Get a hold of yourself."

Compared to my hallucination, Satoru's voice sounded far away and unreal.

"It is said that when the fifth emperor, the Emperor of Delight, came into power, the public's cheers went on for three hundred years. The first to stop applauding were burned as sacrifices and their charred corpses were used to decorate the palace. Because of this, the citizens nicknamed him the Emperor of Eternal Screams."

"Dad. Help."

"The thirteenth empress, Airin, was called the Queen of Sorrow…every morning, the people who had displeased her…took great joy in the most brutal…fasting in order not to throw up…thirty-third, Emperor of Magnanimity, called Wolf King…devoured corpses…his son, the thirty-fourth, Emperor of Pure Virtue, Heretic King…strangled his father to death when he was twelve…feared assassination, killed his younger brother and cousins, all children…their bodies fed to worms and roaches…sixty-fourth, Empress of Holy Beneficence was called Owl Queen…kidnapped a pregnant woman every full moon, swallowed the fetus whole, pellets of human bones as far as the eye can see…"

My father's distorted voice suddenly became strangely monotonous.

"Listen. An ethologist from the ancient civilization, Konrad Lorenz discovered that animals with strong killing instincts like wolves and ravens have an innate mechanism that causes them to avoid conflict with their own species. Physically weak species like rats and humans don't have as strong of a mechanism, so they fight to the point of massacre."

"Dad. Stop."

"Ioki realized that by sacrificing one of his bases, his troops would be able to sever the enemy's lines. But there was one problem. The base that had to be sacrificed was his own. As he predicted, the enemy surrounded his group. Ioki and six of his comrades fought bravely until the end, but they were all slaughtered, the bodies mutilated to the point that they were indistinguishable from ground hamburger meat."

"You idiot. Snap out of it!" Satoru hit my shoulder.

"I'm okay," I said, but the voice persisted.

On top of that, I started seeing things.

"Did you obtain permission from your school to come this far?" the monk said mockingly. "You have violated the very foundations of the Code of Ethics, the last of the Ten Precepts, 'Do not desecrate the Three Jewels'. You have fallen for the words of a demon and questioned the teachings of Buddha. So I will seal you in these human shapes for all of eternity. You will spend the rest of your lives trapped in them…"

"Saki! Saki!"

I was being shaken so hard that I thought I might have whiplash. Slowly, I returned to reality.

"Satoru…"

"What have you been muttering to yourself? I thought you'd gone nuts."

"I think I have," I whispered.

That was probably the real danger. If we didn't have each other, we might really go crazy.

We wandered the tunnels for a long time. In that time, we didn't meet a single queerat, but now that I think about it, they might have detected our presence long before we arrived and left to let us pass.

I was the first to become aware of something unusual.

"Did you hear that just now?"

There was no response. I squeezed Satoru's hand hard. Still no response.

"Satoru?"

I smacked him lightly on the cheek twice, thrice. Finally, he let out a low moan.

"Wake up! I heard something weird."

"There's been a sound this whole time," Satoru said faintly. "Calling us from below. The voices of the dead."

I shuddered. Instead of me, Satoru was the one acting insane now. But more importantly, that sound was worrying. After walking through the pitch-black tunnel, I felt that I had heightened intuition. My sixth sense was warning me that danger was approaching. This wasn't the time to be worrying about Satoru's condition.

Listening carefully, I heard it again. Because of the reverberation in the tunnels, I couldn't tell where the sound was coming from. But it was gradually getting louder. I could hear it clearly. The shrill screams and battle cries of the queerats. The sound of something metallic, like a gong. And something indiscernible, like applause or the roar of the ocean.

All these sounds clashed cacophonously; it was the sound of war. My premonition was right.

"Hurry, run! The Ground Spiders are attacking." I pulled on Satoru's hand, but he didn't respond.

Another fork in the path appeared. Which way should I go? Left, right, or back the way we came?

I reached for Satoru's right hand and pointed the spear forward, but couldn't see the faint green light at the tip. After checking the spear, I discovered that all the glowworms were dead.

Then I realized that we weren't in total darkness. The moss around the path glowed dimly. There must be light coming from somewhere. We had been in the tunnel for so long that I wouldn't be surprised if it was already light outside. If I was right, then the exit should be ahead.

Peering through the darkness, I saw a faint glimmer of light. I grasped Satoru's hand tightly and approached carefully. As we walked, the tunnel gradually brightened. But as it did, the sounds of fighting grew louder as well.

If we went out right into the midst of the fight, we'd have no way to protect ourselves.

It was soon as bright as a moonlight night in the tunnel. Light was coming from an uphill path that curved to the right.

I hesitated for a moment then took a step forward. We couldn't stay here forever. At any rate I wanted to go check that it really was an exit.

In the end, that small hesitation probably saved our lives.

Suddenly, there was a scream, and a queerat came tumbling down the curve.

It shuddered and twitched sporadically. As it tried to come this way, I saw that it was fatally wounded.

At the same time, I smelled something strange. Like rotten eggs. As I looked past the dying queerat, there was a flash of light, and smoke started drifting into the tunnel.

Don't breathe in the smoke. That was my first instinct.

"This way!"

I wheeled around and dragged Satoru back the way we came as fast as I could.

But as we ran down the path, the smell didn't abate. On the other hand, it became stronger.

As I started to panic, Satoru finally came around.

"It's no use trying to run. We're like mice in a maze," he laughed.

"We're not mice," I snapped.

"Yeah we are," he muttered completely nonchalantly. "When they're smoked, mice run to the end of their holes."

"Smoke?"

I finally realized the reason for that strange feeling I was having.

"That's weird. Normal smoke goes up toward the sky, not downward."

"Isn't that obvious?"

Seeing that I didn't understand, Satoru said, with the attitude of an intolerable know-it-all, "They're attacking the enemies inside the tunnels with poisonous gas that's heavier than air."

I gasped. "If you knew, then why didn't you…!"

Suppressing my irritation, I continued down the tunnel, thinking over the paths we had taken so far. There was one long uphill segment that I had hoped would lead aboveground. But when we were close to the surface, it dipped downward again, as if purposefully trying to disappoint us. If we could make it there, then maybe we could avoid the poisonous gas.

Without light from the glowworms, we ran around the labyrinthine tunnels in a state of near panic. It would be a miracle if we managed to find the right path.

"This one goes uphill!"

I felt a long incline. Although our legs burned as we ran upward, we gritted our teeth and kept going. The pain was proof that we were still alive.

Eventually, the ground flattened and started sloping gently downward.

"Let's wait here for a bit."

Once the nest filled with gas, all we could do was hope that it wouldn't reach us. If the paths had been straight, it would have been a better idea to keep running, but the tunnels stretched out all around us like a web. The gas could travel around and come back to us, so in this case the best bet was to find higher ground.

We sat down in the darkness.

"Are you okay?"

A quiet "yeah," was all I got from Satoru.

"I wonder how much the gas has dispersed."

Even though I still couldn't see him, I felt Satoru shake his head.

"It won't."

"But that's impossible. It can't stay in the tunnels forever, right?"

"That's true, but it probably won't disappear for a few days," Satoru sighed heavily. "Before that, we'll either run out of air, or the gas will make it up here."

Bile rose in my mouth. Were we going to die where we stood?

"…then, what should we do?"

"No idea," Satoru answered shortly.

"If the Robber Fly colony manages to win, they might dig us out. Even in that case, we still have to wait until the poison gas disperses."

Despair drained us of all energy. We had been so desperate to find a safe place that it wasn't until now that we noticed we had walked into our own graves.

Waiting helplessly for the end was tantamount to psychological torture. Compared to this, running from the poisonous gas could probably be considered fun.

"Hey. Even though we're stuck in this situation…" the words came out naturally.

"Hm?"

"I'm glad I'm not alone."

"Are you happy you can drag me down too?"

I smiled slightly.

"If I were alone, I wouldn't be able to stand it. And I definitely wouldn't have made it this far."

We had tried our best, even if the final result was to be stuck at a dead end with no escape.

"Same here."

I was relieved that Satoru seemed to have returned to his normal self. Maybe those who were mentally disturbed were incapable of suffering.

"I wonder if Maria and them got away okay."

"Yeah, probably."

"That's good."

That was the end of our conversation.

In the darkness, the only thing that moved was time.

Has it been a minute, five minutes, or half an hour? I jerked awake from a half-sleep.

"Satoru! Satoru!"

"…what?" he answered uneasily.

"It smells. Don't you understand? The gas has reached us!"

The smell of rotten eggs, same as the one that had been at the exit.

"We can't stay here anymore. Should we try going ahead?"

"No, this is the highest point we know of. If we go down, it'll be suicide." Satoru thought hard. "You have a better sense of smell than I do, which way is the gas coming from? The exit, or both sides?"

"I can't figure out something like that."

I could sometimes tell where sounds were coming from, but I didn't think I could do the same for smells.

"No, wait."

I walked a little toward the exit and sniffed the air, then did the same in the other direction. I was glad that Satoru couldn't see me. I was sure I looked like a queerat twitching its nose.

"…I think it's only coming from one direction. The place where the exit was."

"Then we might be able to make it. Let's try to block up the tunnel."

"How?"

"By burying it."

Satoru stuck the spear into the ceiling and started pulling it down. I couldn't see him, but from the movement in the air and the chucks of dirt that hit me on the face, I could imagine the effort he was putting into it.

"Saki! Watch out!"

Satoru suddenly crashed into me. I flew backward into the tunnel with him on top of me.

I was just wondering what had happened when tons of soil started falling from the ceiling. Covering my face with my hands, I waited for the cave-in to stop. I couldn't even open my mouth to scream. When it was finally over, I was covered with dirt, and my legs from the knee down were completely buried.

"Are you okay?" Satoru asked worriedly.

"Yeah."

"That was dangerous. We were almost buried alive."

Thinking logically, trying to bring down the ceiling of the room you were in was stupid, but our instinctive drive to survive caused us to act without thinking of the consequences. And in the end, it proved to be fortunate.

We extricated ourselves from the dirt and confirmed that the path was completely blocked. And just to make sure, we patted the mountain of dirt to make sure that it was solid enough that gas couldn't pass through.

"Hey, look up. If you brought more dirt down, wouldn't it go through to the outside?" I asked looking up at the gouged out ceiling (of course, I couldn't actually see anything).

"You can't hear anything coming from the outside though. There's probably still more than three meters to go. It would be impossible to dig out from here. We'd be buried alive for real."

In the end, we sat down on the dirt again.

In the commotion of blocking the path, I mistakenly believed that we were making progress. But now that I thought about it, our situation hadn't changed a bit. Compared to earlier, we were in an even narrower space, and if the gas suddenly came from the open side of the path, it would be all over for us. If we collapsed the other side of the tunnel too, we'd soon run out of air and suffocate.

This time, we were doomed.

I didn't want to die here. But there was nothing more we could do. As I waited for my life to end, I was surprised at how unemotional I was. But I was too tired to muster up the energy to feel anything.

I edged away from Satoru and sat hugging my knees. Hallucinations started appearing once again. The outside world was so infinite that most things pass unnoticed. This fact came easily as if a switch had been flipped. After wandering through the darkness for so long, our mental defenses were weakened, and the demons in the hidden corners of our mind were free to run rampant.

The first thing I saw was a minoshiro. Its semitransparent body ambled slowly in before me, right to left. It was incredibly realistic. The ends of the Y-shaped feelers on its head and the quills running down its back glowed white, red, orange, blue, and other bright colors.

Then, shining green threads of sticky mucus started dripping from the ceiling. In the blink of an eye, a glowworm galaxy appeared.

The minoshiro appeared to be stuck in the dripping mucus. It twisted itself free and continued walking, but in the end was still trapped. The threads swayed like a chandelier, gradually binding the minoshiro tighter and tighter.

Then, the minoshiro started autotomizing his trapped feelers and quills one by one.

The now bald minoshiro's back started glowing vibrantly with all the colors of the rainbow. The colors mixed and overlapped, creating stripes and spirals in the air. The beauty of it made my mind go blank.

At some point it transformed into the false minoshiro, its colorful afterimage still lingering above its back, and started disappearing from my field of vision.

The residual light slowly faded away into darkness.

Was everything going to fade away as well? Just as I thought that, the scenery changed completely.

Suddenly, an orange light erupted right in front of me. A flame burning above an altar.

From underground comes the sound of chanting, interrupted by orange sparks.

It's the scene from that day.

A praying monk threw some pills and poured fragrant oil into the fire, making it flare up dramatically.

The chanting sounded like a chorus of crickets reverberating in my ears.

That was the day of my initiation to receive my cantus.

Why is it that as my life neared its end, I don't think about my family, or the happy times in my childhood, but of that scene.

Suddenly, a completely different memory surfaced.

"That's against the rules. We can't tell anyone what our mantra is," Satoru said pertly.

Although he was usually up to no good, Satoru suddenly decided to put on the act of a model student.

"It's fine. We're friends, right? I won't tell anyone," I wheedled.

"Why do you want to know anyway?"

"I want to see what it's like. Like how it's different from mine, and such."

"…then tell me yours," Satoru said slyly.

He was provoking me. Fine. Two can play at that game.

"Okay. How about this? We'll write it down, and show each other on the count of three."

"…um. Actually, no. If we show it to someone else, it'll lose its power."

That's not how it works, I wanted to say.

"So? It's not like I'll be looking at it long enough to remember it. Just flash it for a second."

"Then what's the point?" Satoru asked suspiciously.

"It shows that we're friends. Also, we can get a general feel for how long it is and such."

I managed to convince him, so we wrote out our mantras on sheets of straw paper.

"Ready? One, two, three," we flipped our papers around and looked at each other's mantra for a tenth of a second.

"Did you see it?" Satoru asked worriedly.

"Not at all. But I could tell how long it was. It's not that long."

"Yeah, yours too Saki. It's about the same," Satoru said looking relieved.

He crumpled up the paper and set it on fire. It was reduced to ashes in a matter of seconds.

"…but did you see even one word?" he seemed unusually anxious.

"Not a letter. Your writing is so awful I couldn't read it at all."

He was finally convinced and left the room. I went over and looked at the stack of papers he had written on. Satoru pressed down hard when he wrote, so it left a distinct impression. I shaded the paper lightly and the words appeared.

I looked it up in the library and found that it was the mantra of Akasagarbha.

It would probably go smoothly. I held my breath and focused on Satoru.

He was breathing quietly as if asleep, but once in a while murmured something unintelligible.

Right now, Satoru's consciousness was at its lowest, almost like the state you're in when you're hypnotized. If you could bring out all the thoughts that are usually suppressed, like what happened to me earlier, then it wouldn't be surprising if you could control someone through their hallucinations.

The hardest part about hypnosis was bringing down the subject's level of consciousness. If you could do that, then the rest is easy. After all, I already knew the mantra buried deep inside Satoru's mind.

Nonetheless, failure would be unforgivable. If I fail, we would both die here. I rehearsed my lines mentally over and over. I took deep breath and spoke in my strictest voice.

"Satoru Asahina."

Since I couldn't see him, I couldn't tell if there was any response.

"Satoru Asahina. You have broken the rules and gone where you were not supposed to. Furthermore, you have allowed your mind to be poisoned by a demon. The real problem, however, lies much deeper."

I felt him stir.

"You have violated the very foundations of the Code of Ethics, the last of the Ten Precepts, 'Do not desecrate the Three Jewels'. You have fallen for the words of a demon and questioned the teachings of Buddha. Therefore I must seal your cantus immediately."

Satoru gasped and started crying.

I felt terrible for him, but steeled myself and continued.

"Look at the flames."

I didn't hear a response.

"Look at the flames."

Still nothing.

"Your cantus is sealed inside this emblem. Do you see it?"

A deep sigh, then, "Yes."

"The emblem is cast into the fire. Everything has been burned away. All your worldly desires have been burned away. The ashes return to the vast, wild earth."

I raised my voice, "Look. The emblem has been eradicated. Your cantus is now sealed!"

Satoru let out a painful wail.

"Cast aside your worldly desires. To reach nirvana, cast everything into the cleansing flame."

I was getting closer and closer to the critical moment. I approached Satoru.

"Satoru Asahina. In your devotion to Buddha, you have abandoned your cantus," I said as gently as I could, trying to penetrate deep into his consciousness, winding around his mind, binding him with my suggestion.

I wholeheartedly want to save Satoru. Although this is the fastest way, I apologize for making him suffer. I'm also thankful for his efforts to help me. All of my feelings swelled and threatened to drown me. My voice shook.

"Now, by the compassion of Buddha, you will receive a pure mantra, a new spirit, and your cantus will be returned to you."

I hit him on the shoulders, bent down, and whispered in his ear.

"Namo ākāśagarbhaya oṃ ārya kamari mauli svāhā."

For a moment, nothing happened.

But, slowly, light started spreading slowly around us.

"Satoru!" I shouted, crying.

The spear was glowing. The obsidian tip gave off a burning red light.

"Satoru, you're doing this, right? You see? Your cantus is back!"

"Yeah…looks like it," Satoru said, as if waking from a long dream.

"Hurry! Blow a hole in the ceiling! Get rid of all of this!"

"Okay."

"Oh, wait. There might be poison gas outside too…"

"Don't worry. I'll blow it all away," Satoru grinned reassuringly. "There might be a vacuum for a second. Cover your nose and ears."

I managed to plug my nose and ears with my thumb and middle finger. Above me, the dirt started shaking and rumbling as if there were an earthquake.

The next second, there was a roar like a hurricane and the ceiling vanished.

5

In order to quickly subdue the enemy, the Ground Spiders fumigate their enemy's nest with poisonous gas.

There have also been cases where indigenous colonies will flood their enemies by drawing water from the rivers. But the objective of war is to capture and enslave the opposing colony, so tactics that would cause mass deaths are unsuitable. On the other hand, the wars on the mainland are mostly centered on acquiring and protecting limited resources, so killing the enemy might be more efficient in their case.

The gas that they used remains unidentified to this day. The remains of the gas dispersal equipment we found only tells us that the Ground Spiders built a furnace out of stones and mud upwind from the Robber Flies.

I guessed that the rotten-egg smell came from chunks of sulfur that they harvested from a volcano. When sulfur is burned, it creates hydrogen sulfide and sulfur dioxide, which are both extremely poisonous and heavier than air so they would be able to penetrate deep into queerat nests. However, it's hard to imagine those two things alone have the power to exterminate an entire colony.

Satoru was of the opinion that the Ground Spiders went digging through abandoned cities for plastics that contained chlorine. For example vinyl chloride burns to create hydrogen chloride gas, which is also very poisonous and heavier than air. There are a plethora of gases that are lethal, and even more things that can be combined and burned to create them. Or, most terrifying of all, it could be something new that we have yet to discover.

Purging the gas from the Robber Fly colony took some time.

Even using cantus to displace massive amounts of air was not an easy thing. No matter where you tried to move the air, there would be a force pushing back on it. Creating a powerful whirlwind, Satoru churned up the polluted air closer to the ground and carried it far away, letting the clean air flow back in. The image he created for that must have been quite something.

After the gale subsided, I saw the tranquil blue sky above us. In dazzling morning light, we were like two moles that had accidentally burrowed aboveground, squinting our eyes and filling our lungs

with fresh air. Goosebumps prickled my skin as I was exposed to cold air for the first time in a long while.

Once he was accustomed to the light, Satoru looked upward. The hole in the ceiling shimmered and grew larger. He created a gentle slope in front of us, and as if using a mold, shaped the dirt into a staircase. They felt as solid as if baked from terra cotta bricks.

"I'll go first."

"Wait," I held him back. "I'll go look first."

"No, the Ground Spiders might shoot you from afar."

"That's exactly why I should go first. If something happens and you can't use your cantus anymore, then we're done for."

I didn't say anything more and started up the stairs. Before exiting, I listened closely for any movement, but all was silent. Nothing apart from bird cries.

Keeping my body low, I poked my head out.

The whirlwind had flattened out the grass, but I still couldn't see anything. I crept out quietly on all fours and slowly stood up after checking that the surroundings were clear.

Everything swayed gently in the breeze. There were no corpses, no wreckage, nothing.

Satoru came up behind me. "How is it?"

"There's nothing around."

Looking farther, more than a hundred meters out, I saw what I thought were queerat corpses. Maybe from the whirlwind. From this distance, it's hard to tell them apart from humans. A shiver ran up my spine.

"They're definitely around here somewhere. The wind couldn't have killed them all."

We stood motionless, carefully observing our surroundings. Someone like Shisei Kaburagi could create a vacuum lens in midair (the opposite of a normal lens, it magnified things using a concave surface), but of course Satoru didn't have the skill to do that.

"Look over there!" I pointed at a hill to the north where I had seen something move.

We both gazed intently, but nothing suspicious appeared.

"Sorry, it was probably just my imagination."

"No…I don't think so," Satoru crossed his arms, still searching the area closely. "That looks like the best place to spread poisonous gas from. Since they're on a hill and the gas is heavier than air, they don't have to worry about it going the wrong way. And there are relatively fewer obstacles too."

He pulled up a few blades of grass and let them fall to test the direction of the wind.

"There's barely any wind, but it's coming from the north. So I think we're right. They have to be somewhere in that direction."

"Then we should run south!"

Satoru grabbed my arm as I turned around.

"What are you saying? They'll come after us for sure if we run and we'll never know when we'll be attacked from behind."

"But…" I didn't understand what he was trying to say. "What do we do then?"

"Isn't it obvious? We attack first. Unless we exterminate them, we'll never be safe."

"But that," I was at a loss for words. "It's impossible. You're the only one that can fight."

"Even if it's impossible, we have to do it," Satoru said resolutely. "You saw what they did to the monk. Cantus is useless for defense. Using it offensively is the only way to stay alive. …but if you're scared, Saki, you can run. Like you said, I'm the only one who can fight."

Now that he's said that, I couldn't run even if I wanted to. I tried reasoning with him, but in the end we still headed north. No matter how much power we had, if the attack came from an unseen location, we were done for. I acted as an extra pair of eyes for Satoru, prepared to warn him of any dangers.

"We're most likely within shooting range now. Be careful. Let's try attacking from here."

We stood in the shadow of a large rock on the hill and looked up.

"Bullets," Satoru sang out in a strangely euphoric voice.

Tortoiseshell cracks appeared on the top portion of the rock and split it into small pieces.

"Fly."

All at once, the rocks rocketed toward the enemies.

Panic broke out at the top of the hill. Screams of fear and rage from the queerats. They seemed to be scrambling to battle formation. There was the metallic sound of metal on metal, and the twang of bowstrings as they fired back at us.

"Fools," Satoru snorted.

The arrows that had been traveling in a shallow parabola turned in midair and sped back to the archers like faithful hounds.

More cries of pain.

"I wish I could make a wind scythe, but I guess I'll have to make do," Satoru said, sounding like he was making plans for some game.

He glanced back. Forty or fifty meters away, trees were ripped out of their roots and hung in the air.

"Go."

Six huge trees flew toward the top of the hill. I thought they would smash into the enemy camp, but they simply floated above them threateningly.

Screams rose in a cacophony through the air.

"Hm. They look scared."

Satoru's attitude was the same as when he was playing with the pusher during the ball tournament.

"But this is kinda boring. …alright, burn!"

The trees burst into flame, turning into giant torches. Clumps of burning leaves fell onto the enemies.

The queerats were thrown into disarray. The fire ignited everything it touched and pillars of thick black smoke rose toward the sky.

"Now's our chance. Let's climb up."

We left the shelter of the rock and wasted no time running up the hill. The queerats who spotted us as we neared the top let out warning cries, but the next moment fell in a burst of white flames.

"Is that what they use to make the gas?" I pointed at a strange clay structure shaped like a mosquito fumigator.

Five or six of them had protrusions like elephant trunks pointed down the hill.

The nearest one exploded into a million pieces. The ones beside it followed. A troop of queerats was hit with the shards and went down instantly.

"Are you playing with them?"

The queerats hesitated when the saw their comrades fall. When the corpses rose like puppets on a string and started toward them, the troops scattered.

It turns out the only thing needed to crush the spirits of the belligerent queerats was to exploit their fear of the supernatural.

"I see…instead of using brute force, controlling them through fear is much more effective."

Satoru put his newfound knowledge to use immediately. He started raising dead bodies left, right, and center. Queerats who were thought to have no human emotions lost their minds with fear and started attacking each other.

The ones who lost their will to fight and were trying to escape found themselves being choked to death by an invisible hand. In the end, the obliteration of an entire troop took no more than five or six minutes.

"It's too dangerous to go straight through the field. We're totally exposed to the rest of the forest where Ground Spider archers might be lurking," Squealer reported to Satoru.

He was as polite as before, but his words were tinged with awe. No doubt he now understood the terrible power of cantus.

"But the Ground Spiders are in the forest, aren't they?" Satoru scowled discontentedly. "Attacking from here, we can't see the enemies, and they'll just get away. And the field is easy to clear too."

"It is as you say. Imagine however, a single one of them escapes and, heaven forbid, shoots one of the gods with a poison arrow," Squealer looked up fearfully at Satoru.

There was a gash on his nose and dirt was stuck to the blood here and there.

"Our own arrows only cause numbness, but the Ground Spiders are assassins; the poison they procure from their indigenous frogs are lethal. If you are even grazed by them, there's no cure. Our spies have found a safe route, so please come with me."

Once again, Squealer had appeared before us with impeccable timing. After exterminating the troop at the top of the hill, we were having a discussion. I was saying that there was no more danger of being pursued by the enemies and that we should leave as soon as possible. But Satoru was stubbornly insisting on killing all the queerats.

Why was Satoru like this? I was shocked when I looked at his face. The boy I knew so well, the one that hid his kind nature behind a facade of sarcasm and boastfulness was nowhere to be seen. I was looking at someone completely different.

Although he gave all sorts of reasons, like the canoes being hidden too far away, or that we had to strike back when we were struck, I knew from the strange gleam in his eyes that he simply wanted to kill more. No matter what logical argument I came up with, Satoru was unfazed. We had only

vague memories of the location of the Ground Spider colony and had no idea where its core (the place the queen lived) was. With so little information, it was impossible to eradicate them. And more importantly, if Satoru were injured, then that would be the end of it.

My tenacity was working and Satoru was beginning to give in. From the bottom of the came a voice calling at us. Fearing a trap by the Ground Spiders, we looked down cautiously, and saw Squealer with the remnants of the Robber Fly colony prostrated on the ground worshipping us from afar. There were only fifty or sixty of them left, a testament to the efficacy of the poison gas.

By Squealer's explanation, it seemed as if the Robber Fly colony had all retreated deep underground at the smell of the poison gas and had been wiped out as a result. (The Ground Spiders probably added the smell of sulfur to the gas, purposely using the queerats' instinct to hide against them.) On the other hand, Squealer and his group of bodyguards were transporting the queen, and by choosing a higher location, had managed to escape with their lives.

Although their colony had just suffered a debilitating defeat, Squealer and his troop were in good spirits. For one, the queen was safe (as the queen in the sole reproducer, her death would mean the death of the colony), and for another, they had just seen Satoru defeat the despicable Ground Spiders with his powers.

The remaining Robber Flies were clamoring for revenge. Even the usually calm Squealer was no exception, goading Satoru with the fact that he had previously found out the location of the enemy queen until he had no choice but to agree to subjugating the Ground Spiders.

Let's go back to the original topic. At Squealer's insistence, we made a loop to the left at the field and headed toward the Ground Spider's nest in the forest.

"Is this really safe?" I asked Squealer as we walked. Although it was detour, we were still taking a well-cut path through the undergrowth. If the Ground Spiders were so used to battle, they definitely wouldn't miss patrolling a route like this.

"Please don't worry. We sent a scout earlier and there were no signs of the enemy. They must believe that we have all been killed by the poison gas, so they won't be anticipating an attack right after."

Were the Ground Spiders such easy opponents? As of two days ago, I would have accepted his words without question. But after yesterday's events, I was extremely suspicious.

I ordered Squealer to arrange some decoys. It was more for peace of mind than anything else, but Satoru humored me by playing along. Not ten minutes later, this proved to be the right thing to do.

The soldiers walking in front let out sharp warning cries. I had no idea what was happening, but when he looked and started shooting, I realized that we were under attack.

"Gods, hide yourselves! It's the Ground Spiders!" Squealer cried.

"Where?"

"In the trees…the decoy, they fell for it!"

The queerat I appointed to dress as Satoru was lying on the ground. I had chosen the biggest in the troop, but from far away he still didn't look humanoid, so I had him wear two hats and a cape as disguise. There were now three arrows sticking out of him. The strange thing was that the arrows had no feathers on them, but were instead wrapped with string.

"Blowguns! Poison darts…watch out!"

Squealer had reached the same conclusion and shouted a warning. Where in the world were the enemies hiding? I scanned the trees but didn't see any shapes that resembled queerats. I wondered if the shooters could see us as well, but it seemed like they were shooting the darts willy-nilly.

There was a rustling in a big oak tree. I couldn't see anything, but I was sure that something was there.

"Satoru! Shake that tree!"

There were four queerats lying on top of him as a living shield. Ignoring Squealer's orders, he slipped out under them. As if blown by a storm, the tree swayed and bent. Leaves fell like snow and branches snapped loudly.

Something heavy fell out. At once, the queerat soldiers seized it.

"What is it?" I asked, looking at the thing.

What would be the best way to describe it? It looked like those stick insects from the south, or a relative of the sea horse called the leafy sea dragon.

It was about a meter in length and resembled a normal queerat. Looking carefully, its head and limbs were also like a queerat's. The difference was that it was abnormally thin and had skin the color of the oak tree and green leafy protrusions growing from its body. It, the Ground Spider's forest fighter, looked toward the sky and gave a birdlike cry. The Robber Fly soldiers stabbed it with their spears, killing it instantly.

Judging from what just happened, they must have more comrades hidden nearby. I looked around at the trees once more. Now that I knew what to look for, it wasn't half as difficult. In no time, I spotted three more of the camouflaged soldiers.

Before I had even finished pointing them out, Satoru released his cantus and brought them crashing to the ground.

"What the heck are these things?" I asked.

Satoru looked over the corpses with his brow furrowed. I couldn't bring myself to touch them, but the protrusions on their bodies and the leafy structures didn't look artificially made.

"It's not too surprising though. When we ran into them last night, most of the troop members looked like monsters anyway."

I thought of the scales covering Captain Pinecone.

"But…so, they can look like anything? Why?"

"I don't know, but I have a theory," Satoru covered himself with the hood again. "Anyway, we have to be careful from now on, since we don't know what forms they might take."

"We should just turn back. It's too dangerous."

"We've come too far, they'll chase down us if we run."

Satoru left no room for argument, so we kept going.

After a while, the path started curving to the right. We were slowly approaching the Ground Spider's nest.

I reflected on our encounter with the tree fighters. Satoru had ripped up enormous trees and sent them flying through the air, knocking down more trees and bushes along the way.

Gradually, the dense growth thinned out. On the left was a marsh so full of duckweed it looked like it was covered in confetti.

"Wait," I held Satoru back by the elbow. "I have a bad feeling about this place."

I wondered if Satoru was going to mock me, but he looked completely serious.

"You mean there's a trap?"

"I'm not sure…"

I looked suspiciously at the swamp. Bubbles occasionally rose to the surface and I wondered what they were from. Satoru seemed to be thinking the same thing. He levitated boulders over the swamp, dropping them wherever the bubbles surfaced.

They fell with a giant splash and swampy water flew everywhere.

Nothing happened.

"It's fine. Let's go," he said impatiently.

"…but."

"Mammals can't stay that long underwater anyway."

Right now, Satoru had the last say in everything, so we continued forward slowly.

A strange popping sound came from the swamp.

Three otter-like heads floated on the surface, staring at us.

No one could react. The three heads drew out long pipes and blew their darts at us before slipping quickly back under the water, leaving only ripples in the duckweed.

"Damn it. They're messing with us," Satoru's anger boiled over.

The two Robber Fly soldiers that had been hit died instantly from the poison.

"Fine, hide all you want. …I'll boil you alive."

The swamp water began steaming like a hot spring.

I'm not sure why I chose that moment to look away. Anyway, I turned to look in the opposite direction of the swamp and saw something unbelievable.

There was a patch of damp sandy ground full of weeds with a little bulge about twenty centimeters high. What was strange was that the swell was moving slowly, as if moles were tunneling underneath it.

I realized with a jolt that there was more than one of these bumps. Four in all were moving slowly but steadily toward us like sharks following the smell of blood.

I tried to say something but was frozen with fear. Finally I managed to choke out "Satoru…!" but he didn't hear me. I looked back at the steaming swamp right as they caught the enemy. The queerats gathered around let out triumphant yells.

Three boiled corpses floated in the water. They looked more like frogs than otters, with well-developed webs on all four feet.

"Satoru. Behind us…under the sand," I whispered.

He froze. "Where?"

"One right behind us, about six or seven meters. Two to its left. One behind us diagonally to the right.

Satoru turned around at the same time the four diggers emerged.

In a flash, a spout of swamp water washed over them. The formation fell easily as the boiling water crashed down on their heads.

"Hmm. Were the frogs a decoy?" Satoru said as he wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Don't get complacent. They seem to like using sneak attacks."

"Satoru, aren't you tired?"

"Huh? Of course not. This is nothing."

"Still, you should rest a bit…"

Satoru just smiled in response.

I was concerned because he was drenched in sweat. At that time, I hadn't thought beyond that simple explanation.

Cantus can supply infinite energy. But in order to do so, you needed immense concentration, and naturally, both our concentration and physical strength were limited.

"Look out!" I shouted as we stood before a bamboo forest.

Something was falling from high in the sky.

"Don't worry. Everyone, stay where you are!" Satoru stood as if rooted to the spot, staring upward.

The points in the sky gradually grew larger and larger. When I finally recognized that they were boulders, they flew back the way it came as if bouncing off a trampoline.

"They're still coming!"

The second wave was even greater. Satoru sent all of them flying back.

"Shooting randomly isn't doing any damage," Satoru muttered as he broke three of the boulders into smaller pieces and sent them hurtling to where he thought the enemy troops were hidden.

With that, all was silent.

"Did you get them?"

"I dunno."

The enemy attack stopped. Maybe our retaliation had been more effective than we'd thought. Just then, the third wave of attacks came.

This time they arrived above the forest in a low trajectory. One, two…Satoru deflected the boulders. The gap between sighting and impact was so short that he didn't have time to block each one individually.

Then one slipped through his net and came flying into our midst.

My blood ran cold. The rock smashed into the ground, sending up huge clouds of dust. Two, three seconds later, sand and twigs came raining down. The remaining queerats scattered like cockroaches.

"Shit…!"

Satoru didn't have time to check if everyone was okay. He blocked another boulder that came streaking in.

"Get back!"

We quickly retreated thirty or forty meters to avoid the rock. But as if it had seen us move, the next one came right toward us again. They were sniping us.

"Where are they?" Satoru yelled in frustration. "They're watching us somehow. Saki, look for them!"

The spy should be nearby. But how should I look for him? If they were disguised like the tree fighters, it wouldn't be easy. I was at a loss. There was a break in the attacks; the fourth wave hadn't come yet. They probably needed time to prepare the rocks.

I had a sudden realization. Just following our movements was useless. The spy also had to be able to relay our position to the soldiers.

"Satoru, fall back!"

We retreated another thirty meters. There was still no sign of the spy. But what I was really looking for was the signal.

"Over there!" I pointed to the top of the thicket.

A bamboo stalk waved as if in a breeze, but the movement was clearly unnatural.

"That's how they know our position!"

I didn't need to say any more. Flames erupted violently from the stalk and burned with thick black smoke. A blood-curdling wail echoed around us.

"We have to move now. Should we retreat?"

"No, keep going."

Satoru started forward, and all the scattered queerats suddenly reappeared and went into formation.

"Gods, gods," Squealer panted, "thank goodness you're unhurt. With this, victory is in our hands. Please bring the hammer of justice down upon these evil Ground Spiders."

"Stop trying to butter us up," I snapped at him. "You said this path was safe. How in the world is this safe? There's been nothing but ambushes the whole time."

"I am deeply sorry," Squealer bowed his head. "We sent out a scout earlier and he came back completely unscathed."

"Isn't that obvious? They didn't want your scout, they were waiting for us."

"That's enough. We've come this far anyway," Satoru said, grabbing my arms. "Let's hurry and settle this so we can go home."

Oh really, I thought. Something was off about him. In addition to being tired, I thought he seemed to be having trouble focusing his eyes. The boulder he had failed to block earlier came to mind. The usual Satoru would never make such a huge mistake.

"We can't keep going this way though. We still don't know where the rocks are coming from," I said uncertainly. "We should go back."

"No," Satoru shook his head. "The battle has already started. Turning back is suicide."

"But if we leave the forest, we'll be attacked by the rocks. And we can't travel through the forest either because we don't know what traps are here."

"I will send scouts ahead," Squealer said, as if trying to get back into our good graces. "We will find where they are catapulting the boulders from. And with the gods' help, we can strike them down one by one…"

"Don't make it sound so easy. Satoru is tired."

Squealer threw me a deeply suspicious look. I realized I had made a mistake. Even though they might have suspected it earlier, now they probably knew for sure that I couldn't use cantus.

Taking my silence as consent, Squealer started giving orders in his high-pitched queerat language. The Robber Fly soldiers spread out into the bamboo thicket instantly. Even though they had suffered extreme losses so far, their morale was as high as ever.

But a number of them returned within two minutes and made an anxious report to Squealer. He turned to face us. Although I couldn't read queerat expressions, it looked like he had serious news.

"On the other side of the bamboo forest is an open area unobstructed by trees. It appears that the enemy's main force is spread out over there."

"Then we have the advantage since they're easy to spot, right?"

"That…how should I say this? Please come see for yourself. This time I am positive that there are no enemies hiding in the thicket."

Dubious, we followed Squealer through the forest. After about forty or fifty meters, we could see through to the other side. We crouched down to make ourselves less visible and crept forward slowly.

There was an open area of a hundred square meters. The Ground Spiders had felled the trees near their colony to prepare a site for the final battle.

"Amazing…" I said.

The sight of the clamoring troops could only be described as spectacular. Their armor and weapons glittered in the midday sun.

"Three thousand of them divided into five troops," Satoru said, awed.

"But they're all in the open, so it'll be easy to beat them, right?"

I thought Satoru would agree immediately, but he thought for a while.

"It's not a given."

"Why?"

"Look at that formation. The heavily armored foot soldiers are at the front and the archers are hiding behind them."

It was the phalanx formation commonly used in ancient Greece. The frontline had heavy shields and spears, preventing the enemy from penetrating the troop. If that row falls, the one behind would take its place, like a shark replacing its teeth.

"And that's not all. See all the rocks in the back? The group next to it is probably the catapult."

"Catapult? Where?"

Then I understood.

"You mean the group itself is the catapult?"

They were too far away for me to get a close look, but the group of queerats near the rocks were the most extremely morphed out of all the ones I've see so far. The tree fighters and mole troop didn't even compare. They were huge; around three meters tall, with unbelievably long torsos that stretched and shrank like accordions and enormous muscled arms thicker than their bodies…

The ten members of the catapult troop working in tandem could throw a rock weighing hundreds of kilograms over a hundred and fifty meters into the air. Of course, I didn't learn about this, or that they were called the catapult troops, until a long time later.

"Using cantus to wipe out the armored troop will take a long time. During that time, the archers and catapults will be firing, so we'll have no choice but to block them. Then our position will be revealed and gradually the attacks will become more focused. In the end, we won't have the time to attack and it'll become a defensive fight for us." Satoru sighed. "Actually, that's not all. …something's been weird for a while now."

"What is?"

Satoru lowered his voice so that Squealer couldn't hear. "It's probably just because I'm tired, but I'm having a hard time concentrating. I can't form an image properly."

That was the worst. I looked up to the sky.

"Then, you can't use your cantus anymore?"

"No, I can, but I'm at a disadvantage facing such a huge troop all at once."

I knew that we should have run away after defeating the poison gas group on the hill. At that time, Satoru would have had enough energy left to beat the enemies that came after us. We could have escaped. But swayed by Squealer's words and drunk on his victory, Satoru lost his powers of judgment. He shouldn't keep sacrificing himself.

But there's no use regretting something that's already happened. Now, the only way to stay alive was to use our brains.

"Gods."

At some point, Squealer had sidled up beside us. He called out to us with a concerned expression.

"We're thinking about how to defeat the Ground Spiders right now. Don't interfere." I glared at the queerat strategist, but he didn't back down.

"My apologies. But it looks like the enemy is moving."

"Huh?"

We looked back at the troops. The five groups were slowly changing their positions. The center group hadn't moved, but the two on either side had advanced slightly. Then the two groups on the outside reduced the distance between each other by half. In other words, they had spread out into a V-shaped formation in preparation to attack.

Crane wing formation, called that because it resembles the spread wings of a crane. Originally a defensive formation used to surround attackers, the Ground Spiders probably had a different idea in mind. In other words, by stretching the frontline out to the side, they were decentralizing the targets vulnerable to cantus attacks while increasing their own angles of attack, making it harder for us to defend…

The reader might wonder how Satoru and I knew all the detailed warfare terminology we've been using. Of course, at the time, we had no idea. Books relating to war are either class three–forbidden, or class four–knowledge that must never see the light of day. The knowledge I'm writing

about here are all things I learned much later on, discovered in the basement of the ruined library. *Invincible Conquests • A Complete Strategy Guide.*

Let's get back on topic. In the face of the enemy's impressive formation, we were at a complete stalemate.

"What do we do?" Shamefully, that was the only thing I could say. I couldn't use my cantus, and I didn't have the brains to come up with a solution.

"Well, we can only watch for now," Satoru closed his eyes, trying to recover his energy a bit.

"Isn't it better to run? Instead of meeting them head on, going into the forest…"

"We can't. The reason they're not attacking us directly is because they're afraid of our power. They still think we're hunting them. If we run, they'll see our weakness and come after us."

Nonetheless, sooner or later the enemy will question our lack of aggression and go all out on us.

That prediction came true sooner than I expected.

One of the archers stepped forward and let loose the opening shot that flew toward us with a loud buzz. The arrow went way over our heads.

A rain of arrows followed. We covered ourselves, but we could hear the wails of the queerats behind us.

"Shit. Should we retaliate?" Satoru opened his eyes.

"Not yet!" I said frantically. "They're looking to see how we'll respond."

"Then not responding will just make them more confident."

"If we retaliate half-heartedly, they'll figure out the extent of our power. On the other hand, not doing anything will creep them out. They won't expect that we're waiting out the attack."

"But, at this rate…"

The lead troop of the crane wing formation was advancing steadily. What should we do?

"Squealer!" I called the queerat waiting behind us.

"Yes. How may I be of service?"

"Where is the enemy's base…its headquarters?"

"It has not been confirmed, but I believe it is straight ahead in the woods on the other side. The last line of defense for every colony is always in front of the headquarters."

"Satoru! Set those trees on fire!"

He understood my plan and focused straight ahead.

Usually, it would take but a second for him to set something on fire, but this time it took a couple of seconds. But as the leaves of the Japanese snowbell tree started smoking and burst into flames, the enemy stopped. The rear guard rushed back to the nest and started hacking into roots of the burning trees with axes. It was a primitive way of destructive firefighting, but a few minutes later, the flames went out.

"Should I burn it more?"

"Wait. Let's see what they do."

We had to prevent Satoru from using his cantus ineffectively and wasting his energy.

If the enemy advanced, we could threaten them by attacking their home base. But I didn't know to what extent it would work.

For a while, the Ground Spiders did nothing and waited. Then what looked like a messenger emerged from the nest and they started moving forward again.

"The queen's been evacuated through the underground tunnels," Satoru whispered. "They've taken care of what matters most. This time they'll come at us seriously."

Squealer let out a high pitched cry and ran off. His subordinates followed.

"This is it, huh," Satoru sighed.

Once again, volleys of arrows flew toward us. Compared to the earlier attack, this was much greater. The sky was filled with arrows that fell on us like hail.

At the same time, the five catapult troops started launching boulders.

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Most of the boulders flew over our heads and slammed into the ground behind us. The few that were closer thankfully went in the wrong directions.

"They don't know where we are," I said in a low voice. "Run!"

Amazingly, even at this stage, Satoru still refused to move.

"No."

"But…!"

"If we retreat, they'll advance with a full powered attack. In this situation, you can't go anywhere."

"So we're just going to wait to be defeated?"

I looked through the bamboo stalks at the Ground Spider troop. Without breaking formation they advanced slowly but steadily, keeping a careful watch on their surroundings. They would be here in two or three minutes.

"If only we could throw them off the trail somehow," Satoru muttered.

Something clicked in my mind.

"Satoru, how much longer can you use your cantus?"

"I'm not sure, two or three more times? Depends on how hard it is to create the images," Satoru rubbed his temples as if he had a headache.

"Deflect one of the boulders that's farthest away from us."

"What good would that…" he suddenly understood. "Got it."

Using cantus requires a clear field of vision, but if he got any closer to the edge of the bamboo forest, the Ground Spiders might see him. We retreated into the forest, trying to find an area with a good view of the sky. When we found a rocky area without any bamboo, Satoru took a deep breath. As if he were using his cantus for the first time, Satoru chanted his mantra with immense concentration, trying to unify his thoughts.

Suddenly a boulder appeared from the west. I couldn't tell where it was going to land, or how far it would go, but judging from the height, it would be far enough away from here.

The boulder stopped dead as if it had hit a wall. There were surprised cries from the enemy.

"Take this!" Satoru gritted his teeth and made a movement like he was hitting something on the ground.

The rock rocketed toward the ground like a meteor.

Since we couldn't see the troops from here, it was a shot in the dark. Everything was riding on Satoru's luck. I clasped my hands and prayed that it would hit.

There was a dreadful wail that filled me with foreboding, followed by excited shouts. Then there was the sound of clanging armor as the soldiers rushed about.

I crept forward. From between the dense growth, I saw three thousand heavily armed queerats running around in a frenzy. Not a hint of their perfect formation remained. In preparation for a cantus attack, they scattered themselves as much as possible.

I quickly found the place where the boulder landed. There was a giant crater in the ground, around which lay the corpses of numerous queerats. It seemed like one of the catapult troops had taken a direct hit. Judging from the angle, it was probably the troop that had launched the rock in the first place. I couldn't think of a more fitting revenge. For the enemies, they probably really felt that they were battling with gods.

An even more ideal scenario would be if they lost the will to fight completely. But of course, that was just a dream. Once the confusion had settled, the Ground Spiders moved to counterattack.

They launched just as many boulders as before, and even more arrows tore through the air. The difference was that this time everything was concentrated on one small area.

"There's no one there where you're attacking," I said, relieved that they had fallen for the trap. "We should escape while we can."

"Wait. Let me do it one more time, just to make sure."

Satoru took a deep breath and clenched his fists.

"Don't push yourself."

He was obviously having trouble staying on his feet. Sweat beaded his forehead.

"I'm fine. Just one more time."

We retreated into the forest again and looked up at the sky. It came. A huge stone, tracing a parabola through the air.

This time, he didn't stop it, but sent it flying off in a different direction. There was a sharp warning cry. The rock disappeared from our view, and crashed noisily into the ground. It sounded like an explosion. Broken shards clattered as they bounced off the bamboo stalks. Is it possible for the debris to fly all the way here? I was a little worried.

"They've definitely taken more damage this time." Satoru said triumphantly, but there was no energy in his voice. He was probably at his limit.

"Okay, let's get out of here!"

The battlefield was to the north, if we came out through the bamboo forest in the south, the Ground Spider troops might spot us from the west. We turned east and started making our way through the shady forest. Quickly. Quietly. Making sure that we remained concealed.

We wove our way through the dense growths of bamboo. The ground was uneven and full of fallen bamboo and creeping vines that blocked our path. The branches scratched at our faces and

snagged at our feet. Walking even a short distance was exhausting. When we had first followed Squealer into the forest, the path must have been cleared in advance.

"It's okay. Don't worry. We'll definitely get home."

"Mhm," Satoru was just managing to stagger along behind me. His eyes were blank and he was barely talking.

Just a little more. Just a little more until we get out of here. Once we get out of this maze-like forest, we can return by our original path.

I came to a halt as I thought about how Shun and the others were doing. Turning toward Satoru, I put my finger to my lips.

Even without listening carefully, I could hear it. Conversation. The piercingly high-pitched voices of queerats.

We got down on our hands and knees and crawled into a depression in the ground. In front of us were broken stalks of bamboo entwined in dried vines. We were completely hidden from the queerats, but their sharp sense of smell worried me. I hoped that we were upwind.

There. The Ground Spider soldiers were approaching. One…two of them. Along with what looked like a prisoner, though I couldn't see him because he was in shadow.

There must be more units patrolling around. These two seemed completely relaxed so they must believe that we were stationed somewhere else.

We held our breath and waited for them to pass.

I looked at the soldiers through a narrow gap. They wound back and forth like a snake, struggling through the decaying forest.

The prisoner came into view, his hand tied to his waist and being led by a rope.

Squealer.

He looked like he had been badly beaten. One eye was swollen shut and there was dried blood around his nose and mouth. Even so, he was looking around restlessly and sniffing the air vigorously.

Although we had developed some sense of camaraderie after the last night's events, I didn't get the urge to risk myself to help him. After forcing Satoru to help so much, he had run off in the face of the enemy's attack and abandoned us. Being captured by the enemy was getting his just deserts.

Goodbye, Squealer. I won't forget you.

I bid him farewell in my mind. But he was still here. The Ground Spider soldiers tugged the rope, but he squealed in protest, still sniffing the air.

I was shocked. Squealer was looking this way. Since we were hidden in shadow, I thought it would be difficult to see us from his position, but he looked straight through the gaps in the fallen bamboo and right into our eyes.

He suddenly let out a shout and pointed this way.

Traitor. Anger and fear made my blood boil.

The two soldiers became excited. One pulled out a knife and the other unslung his bow and drew an arrow.

"…stop," Satoru said from behind me.

The queerat with the arrow dropped to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. The one with the machete stood dumbstruck.

Then, Squealer spit out a blade he had somehow hidden in his mouth. Gripping it with both hands, he came up behind the other soldier and cut straight through his carotid artery.

Blood spurted out of him like a geyser and he thudded to the ground.

Squealer put the blade between his teeth and deftly cut the ropes around his hands.

"Gods, thank you! Because of you I managed to escape death."

I glared at Squealer as he rushed toward us.

"The only thing you're good at is these kinds of lies. You tried to sell us out!"

"I would never think of doing that. It's a misunderstanding," Squealer said pleadingly. "If I had the chance, I could have dealt with one of them myself. In any case, aren't the gods so powerful that these soldiers are mere trifles to them?"

I was about to point out Satoru's current condition, but held my tongue.

"Even so, it is upsetting that I would be thought of as a traitor. Even if I did betray the gods, they would never go easy on me because of it. As a leader of the Robber Fly colony, once I am captured, my only fate is death."

"But you can't deny you pointed out our position to them."

"I apologize. But if I had not done so, would you not have left me behind? Of course, something like that would not have happened, but worry got the best of me."

The fight went out of me as Squealer hit bullseye.

"Even though you ran off earlier…" I muttered as a last retort.

"Yes. I have no excuse. I deserve nothing more than death for that. I was afraid. I am a coward. To the gods, I'm just a filthy worm. Less than the spit of a dung beetle's larva. Lower than the maggots wriggling in a cesspool, vulgar, repulsive…"

"Stop already," Satoru interrupted Squealer's unending self-abasement impatiently. "The bigger question is, how do we get out of here?"

Satoru leaned against the bamboo stalks and close his eyes. I was worried about him. He should have reached his limit a long time ago, but since he was forced to use his cantus just now, he had to conserve his energy from now on.

"I agree, but for some reason the Ground Spiders seem to think that the gods are on the west side and are pouring all of their energies into surrounding that area. Because of that, I believe the safest way out is to the east," Squealer said calmly, as if nothing had happened earlier.

"So there are no enemies to the east?" I wanted to make sure.

"Yes. All the elite soldiers are concentrated to the west. The ones left in the east are the useless ones, like the ones we just saw."

The world around me darkened.

"So there are some…how many?"

"Altogether about a hundred to a hundred fifty. With little training and crude weapons, they might as well not exist to the gods. It will be just like traveling through uninhabited wilderness."

I sighed. Our situation seemed to only get worse and worse.

"How should we proceed? If we are to go, we must hurry. If the elite troops realize that the gods are not in the west and decide to return, it'll be a problem," Squealer said urgently.

But our fighting abilities were already close to zero.

"Gods."

Was this stupid queerat telling the truth? We were in a lot of danger. I didn't want to imagine what he would do if he found out that we were essentially useless now.

"Gods."

"Shut up for a second."

"But, gods, the worst is coming," Squealer coughed. "There seems to be a considerable amount of soldiers approaching from the west. Could you possibly be planning to break through their ranks?"

I looked toward the west. I couldn't hear the troops marching, but it didn't look like Squealer was lying either. Since queerats had much better hearing than humans did, he might be right.

"What do we do…!"

"Head east immediately. If we must fight, that one is much easier, not to mention…"

"Sh! Be quiet," I shut Squealer up.

I heard it. He wasn't lying. Sounds of chopping and marching traveling faintly on the air. The careful and silent troops gave off an aura intense malice.

"Gods, there is no time! We must go!" Squealer urged, starting to move east.

Quietly and carefully, we approached the clearing beyond the bamboo forest. But there we ran into something much more frightening.

The Ground Spider patrol. Seven or eight of them just loafing around. They hadn't noticed us yet. But if we kept going, we wouldn't be able to avoid meeting them head-on.

"Gods, please deal with them. It would be best if done as silently as possible."

I looked at Satoru, who shook his head slowly. He didn't have the energy to do it.

"Gods, what are you doing? Gods?" Squealer asked uneasily. "There's no time for uncertainty! If we don't escape now, the troops behind us will catch up." His voice gradually took on an unpleasant tone. "Gods, what are you doing? Why are you not exterminating them? Could it be that…" his eyes gleamed with a strange light I hadn't seen before, "…you are no longer gods?"

Time froze. I stared back at Squealer.

A loud whistle shattered the frosty silence.

As if a spell had been broken, we looked around.

"What was that sound?"

I heard it again. It wasn't from the same direction. They came from different places, like signals being transmitted back and forth through the mountains.

"Gods, gods!" Squealer was beside himself with joy. "Good news! The footsteps are fading. The troop coming from the west is retreating!"

"Why?" I was more confused than relieved.

"Reinforcements! The conch sound is from the Giant Hornet colony. There's nothing to worry about anymore. The Giant Hornet is the biggest colony in Kanto, with a force over twenty thousand strong. They'll crush the Ground Spiders in the blink of an eye!"

Before I knew it, the Ground Spider patrol had vanished.

Were we really saved? I snuck a glance at Satoru, and didn't see a trace of happiness or relief on his face.

The Giant Hornet colony didn't win through sheer numbers, but also through their fierceness.

They started out shooting from a distance, but once the arrows ran out, they flung themselves bodily at the enemy. One troop of lightly armored queerats ran swiftly through the concentrated phalanx formation, casting what looked like a net. Once the Ground Spiders were immobilized, the Giant Hornet troop stabbed them with so many spears that the corpses resembled a sea urchin.

Normal sized soldiers charged the three-meter tall mutants. They hung on with their teeth as they slashed at the enemy with longswords. No matter what kind of monsters they were up against, the Giant Hornets dispatched them with ease.

"The enemy's main force has been destroyed. Now all that's left is to capture the queen," the commander of the Giant Hornet army, Kiroumaru, said calmly after surveying the battle. "They looked so different that I couldn't even consider them my own kind, but in end their monstrous appearance was just a bluff. They were not worthy opponents."

"Isn't that slightly disrespectful?" Squealer interjected.

"Oh? What do you mean?" Kiroumaru looked down at Squealer, who was about two heads shorter.

Human names are only given to queerats in recognition for their outstanding abilities. Out of all the colonies, fewer than twenty have been named. Even though I didn't find out about this until much later, I already realized that Kiroumaru had an extraordinary presence. He was taller than us, and outside of the queen and the mutants, was the tallest queerat I've ever seen. His long face and slanted eyes gave him a wolfish look befitting his name.[*] Although his squinted eyes made it look like he was smiling, it was with the same expression that he tore into his enemy's throat. Also, all the Giant Hornet members had tattoos on their faces and bodies. Most of them only had a stripe bordering their faces, but Kiroumaru was covered from his eyes to the bridge of his nose in complex arabesque patterns. It added to his strange appeal.

"The Giant Hornet soldiers are undoubtedly daring and resolute. However, the reason you won so easily against the Ground Spiders is that the gods already wore down their strength. If the catapult troop was whole and unharmed, they would have been a considerable threat…"

"The catapult troop was nothing special," Kiroumaru said dismissively. "It was my first time seeing the weird creatures, but catapults have always been used in sieges. Their archers were nothing but targets, and we swept the floor with them in hand-to-hand combat."

"Still, speaking like that…"

"You are just a civil servant and don't understand the ways of war. Therefore, I will overlook your misguided pedanticism." He looked coolly at us. "Although, the Ground Spider's foolish tactics may well be due to the presence of the gods. As was their stupid plan to concentrate all their forces in front and have no defense in the rear. I, Kiroumaru, am deeply indebted."

[*] The second kanji in Kiroumaru (奇狼丸) means 'wolf'

"Not at all," I answered shortly. I was about to thank him too, but something stopped me.

Then a messenger arrived and spoke in queerat language.

Kiroumaru nodded satisfactorily. "The nest has been found."

"Huh? Th-that's wonderful…" Squealer looked like he wanted to say something.

Kiroumaru ignored him and turned to us. "I have an errand I must attend to. What will you do?"

I was about to refuse, but Satoru, who had had his eyes closed this entire time, answered, "We'll go too."

"Shall we go then? I will lead the way."

We followed Kiroumaru out of the camp as he strode calmly through the bowing soldiers.

"Why are we going with him?" I whispered to Satoru.

"We can't show him any weakness."

Satoru kept his eyes closed. Just staying conscious seemed to cost considerable effort.

"But the Giant Hornet is the most loyal colony. Why do we have to be so cautious?" I asked, even though I had some doubts about him myself.

"It's because they're the most loyal that it's so important to be careful."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard to explain right now…" Satoru furrowed his eyebrows. "Look, ever since last night, we've walking the line between life and death, right?"

"Uh huh."

"But I'd wager that this is actually the most dangerous situation we've been in so far."

I had no idea what he was talking about. Bursting with questions, I turned back toward Kiroumaru.

"Do you see it? The entrance to the nest is straight ahead."

It was impossible not to see it. On the slope was a hole big enough for an elephant to go through. There were traces of the huge trees used for camouflage that had been dug up.

"But aren't there multiple exits on the other side? Can't the queen escape from a hidden route?"

Kiroumaru smiled, "There's no need to worry. We first seal all the other exits and force the queen to come out this way. The queen will try to run, not fearing the power of the gods. And to begin with, where the queen lives is considered a sacred place and doesn't have a lot of tunnels running through it."

"So, where is the queen now?"

"In a room in the deepest part of the nest."

A large number of Giant Hornet soldiers came flooding out of the nest. Some of them carried something carefully in their arms.

"Those are…?" I realized before I finished asking.

Nestlings.

"There are many nurseries within the nest. These nestlings were all birthed by the Ground Spider queen."

"But, why?"

The satisfied look on Kiroumaru's face was almost repulsive. "These are treasured spoils of war. They are the workforce that will serve our colony in the future."

One of the soldiers brought a nestling to Kiroumaru. It hadn't yet opened its eyes and was reaching out with its front paws as if trying to touch something. Its pink skin made it look much more like a rat than its adult counterpart.

I remembered what Squealer had said.

"The queen is executed and the rest of the members become slaves. As long as they live they are treated as less than scum, and when they die they are left out to rot and fertilize the fields."

The nestlings had only a dismal future ahead of them. Although they were almost as intelligent as humans, queerats were still more like ants in nature. Why did such warped animals exist? That was a question I asked myself over and over last night.

Squealer, who had following behind us, went up to Kiroumaru and started saying something to him. Since it was queerat speak, I couldn't understand his words.

"The gods are present. Speak in Japanese," Kiroumaru spat.

"Ah, gods, I'm deeply sorry. As a representative of the Robber Fly colony, I am just voicing my rights," Squealer said, bowing repeatedly.

"Your rights?" Kiroumaru smiled pityingly. "Why do you think you have rights?"

"Isn't it natural? The Robber Fly colony acted as the first line of defense against dangerous invaders and held them at bay until help arrived. However, during that time, we lost many soldiers to the enemy's cruel and cowardly attacks. If it were another colony, they would have had to bear just as much damage. Since the Robber Fly colony acted as a barrier for all the other colonies, shouldn't they be rewarded for their efforts?" Squealer said with so much passion that he was all but crying.

I didn't get where he was going with this.

"Hn. Such foolish talk." Kiroumaru saw my look of confusion and said, "Very well. It would be unfortunate if a small colony died out just like that. For your spoils, two hundred adults and three hundred nestlings. That is all."

Squealer prostrated himself before Kiroumaru. "Thank you! I can report back to the queen with pride. Two hundred slaves and three hundred nestlings is enough to rebuild our colony. I am so deeply grateful, I have no words…!"

"Well, when the time comes the deed will pay for itself," Kiroumaru's eyes shone with a frighteningly cold light.

There was a commotion at the entrance of the nest. Soldiers that had been standing with spears at the ready went forward to help the ones that had rushed out of the entrance.

"Oh, it looks like some are still hiding inside," Kiroumaru said rather cheerfully.

Slowly, a huge queerat emerged. It was probably as big as Kiroumaru. I remembered him as I looked at his hammer-shaped head and leather armor covered with a cloak. It was the Ground Spider soldier than Captain Pinecone had reported to. Given Captain Pinecone's submissive attitude, he was probably the highest commanding officer.

As Hammerhead stood and looked around calmly, his eyes fell on us. He spread out both hands to show he was unarmed, and called out something in a surprisingly dainty voice.

"Hn," Kiroumaru snorted.

"What did he say?" I asked.

His smile widened, "It's a dialect, so I don't understand completely. Our language differs by country and region. But basically, he wants us to spare the queen if they surrender."

"So you'll help her?"

"Not a chance," he narrowed his eyes. "Surrendering now is completely ridiculous, and sparing the queen in a war between colonies is impossible. Even an idiot like him should know this."

Hammerhead continued talking.

"He wants to have a conference with us. Important information in return for the queen's life. Let's see what he has to say for the time being," Kiroumaru went forward, still smiling.

Maybe the Ground Spider commander knew something about Shun and the others. Just as I thought that, something came out of the nest and hid behind Hammerhead's cloak. Kiroumaru stopped immediately. But as he saw the thing peek out behind Hammerhead, he relaxed and continued forward.

Certainly, anyone who didn't know what it was would think it was just two large dogs. they had stout bodies covered in bristly black hair and abnormally small heads that hovered just above the ground.

"Blowdogs…!" I tried to scream, but only a hoarse whisper came out.

Kiroumaru was only six or seven meters away from Hammerhead.

Suddenly, the scene of Rijin's death resurfaced as vividly as if it were happening right now.

The blowdog inflated. Its coarse black hair spread out and white lines of light showed between the bristles. If this warning were ignored, it would puff up one last time. Right before it died, its eyes rolled back in its head and saliva dripped from its mouth, a look of indescribable ecstasy on its face. As it reached its limit, the skin was stretched so thin that you could see through it in some places. Inside it, small blue and white sparks danced. (This was the first time I clearly saw the instant that the explosive powder in its body was ignited.)

Then the blowdog exploded.

The skin on its back was torn into pieces, and its head, still with a Cheshire Cat smile, was blown away in the blast. However, the shockwave kicked up great clouds of dust, expanding outward at increasingly high speeds. The blowdog's sharp bone shards tore into Rijin and his body was shredded as if it had been scraped away by a coarse file.

I snapped back to reality. I thought two or three minutes had passed, but it was actually only a second or two.

The blowdogs made their way in front of Hammerhead. Kiroumaru halted again. As if he sensed danger, he backed up nimbly. However, his honor as commander caused him to move just a second too late.

Skipping its final warning completely, the blowdogs went straight to inflating themselves to the point of explosion.

"Satoru!" I gripped his arms tightly.

He opened his eyes.

All sound vanished and everything seemed to slow down. Time stretched out exponentially like in a dream.

The blowdogs had swelled up into two giant balls. White warning lines were visible between their furs.

Then, they would explode…so I thought.

A split second before it happened, Satoru halted it with his cantus. One was sucked back into the entrance. The second he couldn't get to in time. He forcibly crushed the blowdog's body as it tried to explode. For a fraction of a second, the two opposite forces clashed.

The blowdog rippled strangely as it was grasped by an invisible hand, and imploded.

The outward force of the explosion rebounded in on itself. But then it ricocheted back out again with greater force.

If that second explosion had been repressed too, what would have happened? When a seal is explosively broken, the stronger the seal, the more powerful the explosion. If the explosion had broken the cantus seal, no one would have been left alive.

Fortunately, the image that Satoru had created of a giant hand saved our lives. A jet of energy shot out of the gap between the index finger and thumb.

Around the same time, the second black ball that had been pushed into the nest rocked the air with its explosion and blasted large amounts of dirt from the ceiling.

A split second before the shock reached us, I used all my remaining strength to push the now-unresponsive Satoru into the ground.

As we waited for everything to settle from the blast, I thought about the look of pleasure on the blowdog's face before it self-destructed, and irrationally decided that it must have been male.

The nest had become a giant graveyard.

The bodies that the Giant Hornets brought out were covered in extensive wounds. Of course, they were all dead. The blowdog's bones couldn't have traveled through the twists and turns in the tunnels, so they must have been killed by the shockwave (from the detonation that was going faster than the speed of sound).

There was a clamor from the excavating soldiers. One of them came running out ecstatically.

"The queen's body has been found," Kiroumaru said after the soldier had made his report.

He had been seriously wounded in the blast and the bandages around his back and shoulder were stained red with blood. The air was full of flies buzzing around the mountain of excavated corpses and they hovered annoyingly around Kiroumaru as well.

"I will go inspect it."

He looked down at the ragged body at his feet. If it weren't for the remaining shreds of the cloak, you wouldn't be able to tell that it was Hammerhead. He had intended to take Kiroumaru down along with himself. Kiroumaru stomped derisively on the corpse and continued on his way. It obviously hurt to walk. But more than that, the pain of anger and regret at the sacrifices of his troops caused by his own negligence was hard to bear.

I looked at the unconscious Satoru. He didn't seem to be hurt and his breathing was regular. He'd probably be okay if I left for a few minutes.

"Can I see too?"

For the first time since the explosion, Kiroumaru showed his disconcerting smile. "…I don't really recommend it."

"Please take me with you as well." Squealer followed, ignoring Kiroumaru's warning.

He seemed relatively unharmed from the explosion.

A large part of the nest had collapsed from the shockwave. We stood over the deepest crack and looked down. I gasped.

"Is that really the queen?" I asked.

Kiroumaru nodded. "Since the queen needs to give birth to so many nestlings, her body is necessarily much larger. That said, I don't think there's ever been one this big in our country."

It seemed impossible to lift her up out onto level ground.

However I looked at it, she was about as big as a mid-sized whale. Most of her bulk appeared to be her uterus. Her head was incongruously small in comparison.

"Let's return," Kiroumaru said, giving rapid orders to the soldiers working below.

The soldiers heaved in unison and flipped the queen onto her back. We saw her stiff face. It was similar to the Robber Fly queen, but much uglier. Her teeth, ten centimeters long each, were bared as if she had died in a fit of anger.

What was even more shocking was her abnormally long torso. There were innumerable nipples for feeding many nestlings at one time. But apart from that, I thought I also saw a large number of feet, like on a hornworm or a minoshiro.

"Why are there so many legs…?" I asked.

"Unthinkable…this is terrible," Squealer said, "It's absolutely unforgivable!"

"We already knew the soldiers were completely mutated, yet you're surprised that the queen is also a mutant?" Kiroumaru said sarcastically.

"Mutant…? But how?"

"The queen can't be! She's the one who makes mutants. This queen was mutated by the previous queen who gave birth to her!" Squealer shouted.

"Huh? So…?"

Kiroumaru glared at Squealer, who was beside himself with anger.

Squealer cringed and shut his mouth. "I'm sorry, I cannot explain more."

Turning toward me, Kiroumaru bowed.

"Why not? I'm a god!"

"I understand. Earlier, you saved my life. I will never forget that until I die. But the Ethics Committee has said that we are not allowed to let young gods know of any knowledge that might harm them."

It looked like I wasn't going to be able to get more information out of them, so I gave up and went back outside to Satoru. As I was leaving, Kiroumaru was giving out orders on how to move the queen's corpse. I wanted to know why they needed the corpse, but was afraid of what the answer

would be. Suddenly I was so tired that I was about to keel over. I didn't care about the queerats anymore. They could go kill each other for all I cared.

Before long, we were shown to the Giant Hornet camp. Even as two queerats carried Satoru around, he didn't wake up.

I threw myself onto a bed of soft hay and fell asleep instantly.

Since yesterday, we had been thrown into one dangerous situation after another. But we were safe now. We were going home. Kiroumaru would guard us until we got to where the canoes were hidden, and then we would row down the river ourselves. I looked at Satoru sleeping soundly next to me. I wasn't worried anymore. Even if he didn't wake up, I would bring him home.

Thinking of Shun, Maria, and Mamoru gave me a leaden feeling in my chest. I wanted to believe that they were okay, but in light of all the disasters the two of us had gone through, it was hard to be optimistic. If their canoes were still there, I'd have to ask Kiroumaru to go search for them.

But that could wait until I woke up. The Ground Spider threat had been dealt with. If the three of them were still okay, they probably wouldn't run into any more danger.

With that thought, I felt myself finally relax.

I can't stay awake any longer. Let me sleep for a moment.

Slowly, I slipped into darkness.

Right before I fell asleep, Satoru's voice echoed in my head.

"Look, ever since last night, we've walking the line between life and death, right?"

"Uh huh."

"But I'd wager that this is actually the most dangerous situation we've been in so far."

What exactly was the danger? Wasn't Satoru just being overanxious?

Now I was worried, but I couldn't fight the drowsiness anymore.

I fell into a deep sleep.

7

When I opened my eyes, the room was already dark.

Everything earlier seemed like a dream. Everyone was together. Father. Mother. Satoru. Shun. Maria. Mamoru. I can't remember exactly, but there may have been others as well.

In a familiar dinner scene, the dining table was replaced by the ball tournament field. Satoru and I were on the side, trying to use our cantus to move the pushers. The opposing team was steeped in shadow, so I couldn't tell who they were. Innumerable enemy pieces rose up from the earth and bore down on us. We ran blindly without knowing where the goal was.

The enemy chased us persistently, gaining territory while pressing us farther and farther back. We were slowly being driven into a corner. Soon, we were completely surrounded.

Just as I thought we had no way out, the nearest enemy piece was blown away with a solid bang. Then another. Then even more as if in a chain reaction.

It was unmistakably Satoru's doing. Blatantly breaking the rules. No, even more than that…

I suddenly realized that the enemy's pieces looked like queerats. Panicked, I tried to escape, but couldn't without killing them all.

I stared dumbly at Satoru.

Part of his face was in shadow, and I couldn't see his eyes. But there seemed to be a slight smile on his lips.

I woke up with my heart racing.

Then I recalled where I was. At once, the anxiety caused by the real world swept away all traces of the dream. How long had I been asleep? If Satoru's intuition was correct, we were still in danger.

Listening carefully, there were no sounds other than Satoru's breathing.

I realized there was something near my pillow. Two bowls on a wooden tray. I picked it up, but couldn't tell what was inside. I sniffed it and smelled the faint scent of miso. Just then, my stomach let out a loud growl. Thinking back on it, I hadn't eaten anything since lunch yesterday.

There were no chopsticks, but something roughly carved out of bamboo that looked like a lotus. I hesitated for a second, then put the lotus into the bowl and brought it to my lips. I didn't know what was in it, so I tasted it carefully. It was extremely bland, like porridge with nothing in it, but before I realized it, I was spooning fervently from the bowl.

The bowl was empty in seconds.

In my hunger, I looked greedily at the second bowl. It was his share, but if he continued to sleep like this, he wouldn't need it tonight.

Of course, I wouldn't actually steal his food, but being only half full was even more unbearable than not eating at all.

I tried to wake Satoru. Though I knew that I should just let him sleep. To be completely honest, I wanted to shake him awake and tell him that there was food, and have him say that he didn't want it so I could have it instead.

I shook his shoulder, but he didn't wake up. It was pointless. He had single handedly stopped a blowdog from exploding and thrown another deep into a cave. On top of that, he had already been exhausted and wasn't in any shape to be using his cantus to begin with. If he hadn't managed to muster up the last of his strength then, we would all have been blasted to death.

Embarrassment flooded through me and I stopped shaking him.

Now I was starting to worry. Could pushing his body and mind past their limits leave lasting damage on his brain? On top of that, there could also be side effects from the haphazard hypnosis I used on Satoru to help him regain his cantus.

Satoru let out a quiet groan. I couldn't see him clearly, but he seemed to be grimacing with pain.

I leaned in and kissed him softly. His face relaxed into a slight smile. There was a glimmer as his eyes caught the light. Although this wasn't a prince's kiss, it seemed to have the same effect.

"Saki…how long have I been here?" he asked hoarsely.

"I don't know. It's already dark outside."

Satoru sat up slowly. "Is there something to eat?"

I passed the bowl to him. "How did you know?"

He put his finger to my lips. So the prince didn't wake from the princess's kiss, but from the lingering aroma of food. Satoru must have been hungry, since he finished the bowl even faster than I did. He looked like he wanted to lick the bowl when he was done, but noticed me looking at him.

"Hey, do you think we're still in danger?" I asked the question that had been bothering me the most.

"Yeah," he said without hesitation.

"But what danger? The Ground Spiders have been wiped out…"

Satoru put his finger to my lips again. Though for a different reason than before. "Isn't there a guard outside?"

To be honest, I had not thought of that. We had been sleeping like logs inside one of the rooms of the Giant Hornet camp. It was a simple shelter with a thatched bamboo roof. The only entrance was covered with a hanging straw mat.

I crawled slowly over to the entrance and peeked outside. There they were. Two armored queerats standing guard. Silently, I crawled back.

"There is."

Hearing this, Satoru pulled me closer and whispered in my ear. "If they're low level soldiers, they probably won't understand much Japanese. But let's talk like this just to be safe."

His breath tickled my ear. I put my lips to his ear.

"But why do we have to be so cautious? The Giant Hornet colony is…"

Before I had fallen asleep, I had thought of the same question.

"You're right. They're the most loyal to humans," he whispered. "But that doesn't mean they're loyal to us. Kiroumaru and them are only unswervingly obedient to the adults, right?"

"So?"

"So in the end, their priority is what the Ethics Committee says," he stopped abruptly.

"You don't think the Ethics Committee wants to do something to us?"

His hand tightened on my shoulder. "We met the false minoshiro and learned things we're not supposed to know about."

"But that…!"

"Sh. You're being loud," Satoru was silent for a moment, his attention on the door. "Let's assume what the false minoshiro said is true. It's disgusting to imagine, but if humans really could attack each other with cantus, our society would be destroyed in an instant. So wouldn't they use any method possible to prevent that, no matter how frightening?"

"But are they really going to do something to us?"

"Don't people always say that they remove potential problem children before anything actually happens? In other words, they're disposed of."

"Disposed…it can't be. Don't say something so ridiculous. That can't happen!"

"Think about it. In Harmony School and Sage Academy, students disappear every year, don't they? It's weird no matter how you think about it. If they're not disposed of, where do they go?"

I felt all my hairs stand on end. Although listening to what the false minoshiro said had been frightening, at the time I only half-believed it, so I didn't think too much. But now I felt more terrified than I had been all last night.

"But…but, no one knows that we met the false minoshiro."

Rijin was the only witness, but the blowdog explosion had killed him.

"There's proof though," Satoru said chillingly. "We had our cantus sealed, right? They wouldn't do that unless we had broken a serious rule."

"…so they're not going to help us?"

If the town decided to get rid of us, it meant that we had no place to return to. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"No, there's still hope. It should be possible to at least go back to the town. Our parents will help us somehow. Especially your mom, isn't she the head librarian?"

"Y-yes, but," my mind was spinning. "Then what exactly are you worried about?"

Seeing that I still didn't understand, Satoru let out a sigh. "Kiroumaru will probably include us in his report about the Ground Spiders. If they find out that you can't use your cantus, they'll know that something happened. And if they decide to deal with us right here, they'll command Kiroumaru to do it.

I felt that he was over-thinking it. "Getting rid of us…even though they have no proof for anything?"

"It'll be too late once we get back," his voice shook. "If we tell even one person about what we learned, the information will spread in an instant."

"…but!"

"And if what the false minoshiro said about death feedback is true, then no one in the town can kill us. If they do, they'll die too. That means that they usually go outside the Holy Barrier to get rid of problem children. …I think they use queerats."

I was speechless. Would they really do something that terrifying?

Cold sweat ran down my back. Did the initiation at the temple take place outside the Holy Barrier for the same reason?

"Kiroumaru probably sends his reports by carrier pigeon since that's the fastest. If the pigeon is quick enough, it can get to the town before sundown. Then the committee will discuss and send back a response by the next morning at the earliest."

"Then we have to get out of here now!"

"Yeah. It's obvious they'll send someone after us, but if we can make it to where the canoes are hidden, we may have a chance."

Soon after, the worst possible situation became reality.

Although Satoru had recovered a bit after sleeping, he was still far from being able to use his cantus like he usually could. Just concentrating on a target made his head hurt, so it was as if his powers were still sealed.

So how should we deal with the two guards outside? This situation was completely different from when we were trapped by the Ground Spiders.

We left the hut as nonchalantly as possible. The two guards bowed deeply and sent us off.

"Slowly. Don't act alarmed," Satoru hissed. "If we just look around like this, it'll look like we're taking a post-meal walk."

"It's not like we ate enough to need this though."

The camp was made of twenty to thirty small huts. Of course, the entire troop wouldn't fit in the huts, so most of them probably spent the night underground. The path between the huts was lit with braziers, around which fluttered enormous moths.

After our battle with the Ground Spiders, the sentries seemed much more relaxed around us. They bowed silently when they saw us pass by, but made no other movements.

Then, it should be easy for us to slip off into the night without too much difficulty. That was the plan. But a commotion erupted behind us and we froze.

"Gods! Where are you going?"

Squealer. We returned slowly.

"You've woken. Have you eaten?"

"Yes," Satoru said, smiling stiffly. "It was quite good."

"Is that so? Our food is completely different. All they have here is that bland miso porridge. The Giant Hornets are not used to entertaining guests. Just for reference, what did you eat?"

How should I answer? Why was he asking such unnecessary questions anyway? I was starting to get annoyed.

"That aside…what are you doing?"

"Well, I was working until just recently. I'm not complaining. Since the Giant Hornets saved us and all. General Kiroumaru was injured in the explosion and writing reports is difficult for him. Speaking of, in such a huge army, General Kiroumaru is the only one who can actually read and write Japanese, if you can believe that."

"What report?" Satoru asked sharply.

"Ah, a simple account of the subjugation of the Ground Spiders was sent to Kamisu 66." Squealer looked blankly at us as we both started asking him questions.

"Saki, you go first."

"Okay. What did you write about the subjugation?"

"Of course, the details of the entire battle. From us being attacked by poison gas until the part where reinforcements arrived…"

"Did you write about us too?"

"Huh?" Squealer looked suspiciously at us.

"I mean, if you write something weird, our teacher will get mad at us when we go back."

"Don't worry. I will not write anything dishonoring the two people we are most grateful to."

"But, what exactly did you write?"

"Ah, well. About how the gods were lost and met the Robber Fly colony by chance, and after that, how the gods helped us escaped safely from the Ground Spider's ambush, stuff like that."

"Nothing other than that?" I asked, relieved.

"Of course not, just…"

"Just what?"

"Since the two of you seem to have exceeded your physical limits, I thought you needed extra care, so I made a request out of concern for you."

"What do you mean, we're not well?"

"Ah, well, in this fight, the male god seemed to be the only one using his power. The male god is no doubt fatigued, and I thought perhaps the female god was ill."

This meddlesome rat. Despair and anger clouded my vision. I looked pleadingly at Satoru.

"…Squealer. You said you were working until just now?"

Why was Satoru asking about something so irrelevant?

"Yes. I finished just a while ago."

"Then, how are you sending the report? It's too dark now to send it by carrier pigeon, isn't it?"

"Yes. The Giant Hornet colony uses pigeons for emergency communications during the day, and bats at night."

We looked at each other. If they used bats, then the town's reply might come before the night was even over.

"…by the way, some colonies have recently started using falcons instead of pigeons, which is against the rules of the original pact. And although using bats is supposed to be safer, I've heard that some colonies have started training horned owls to capture the bats…" Squealer seemed determined to continue talking for the rest of the night.

"Hey, Squealer," I said as neutrally as possible. "We kind of want to take a walk around there."

"Where are you going?" Squealer looked surprised. "It's already three hours past sundown. It's dangerous to go far."

Three hours past sundown was approximately ten o'clock.

"It's fine. After all, the Ground Spiders have been exterminated, right?" Satoru's jovial tone was much more natural than mine.

"But if anything were to happen, we'd be entirely responsible. I'll call for some guards right now…"

"No need. The two of us just want a change of scenery. Okay? We'll be back soon. So there's no need to tell anyone," Satoru said, taking my hand and pulling me away.

When we turned back, Squealer was still standing in the same spot, watching us go.

"Won't he think it's weird?" I whispered.

"We can't help if he's a little bit suspicious. Anyway, we have no choice but to run away, right?"

We continued walking slowly away from camp. Pretending to look up at the sky, we peeked behind us. Once we ascertained that no one was looking, we hid in the shadow of the trees. Crouching low, we entered the grove of trees in the middle of the field.

"Do you know which way we should go?"

There was supposed to be a compass in my backpack, but after so much running around, I had no idea where it had disappeared.

"Yeah, kind of," Satoru looked up at the orange moon hovering over the treetops. "It's almost the full moon, so the moon comes out from the east, travels through the southern sky at night, and sets in the west in the morning. Since it's about ten o'clock right now…"

Satoru's vague mumbling wasn't exactly comforting, but since I knew almost nothing about astronomy and had no sense of direction, I had no choice but to listen to his judgment.

We traveled through the wilderness, going eastward as best as we could. Since last night, we had taken so many winding paths that it was impossible to tell how far we were from Lake Kasumigaura. And thinking back to when Rijin was leading us to the Temple of Purity, we had been unbelievably tired, but had somehow continued onward, making numerous zigzags as we went. Yet for some reason, I was convinced that if we just kept going east, we would make it to where the canoes were hidden before sunrise.

After three hours of hurrying through the pathless forest, I was starting to lose stamina. My feet hurt and my head spun. I was starving, but more than that, I was so thirsty that it was almost unbearable. But since we had not prepared any water bottles, I had no choice but to endure it. Anyway, we took a break, choosing an area where the grass was wet with dew.

"We've gone pretty far, haven't we?"

"Yeah. More than halfway there, probably," Satoru assured me confidently.

I didn't think he had any basis for his claim, but I also didn't think there was any good in questioning him, so I accepted his words quietly.

How were Shun, Maria and Mamoru doing at this moment? I glanced unthinkingly behind Satoru as I thought, and jumped.

"What?"

"Nothing. …I just thought that looked like a blowdog," I pointed at a piece of rotting wood.

Satoru smiled, "It does kind of look like one."

"You weren't scared though."

"No, you'd never see a blowdog around here to begin with."

"How come?"

"Saki, you saw the blowdog's true form, right?"

It was hard to say that I didn't now that he had asked. "Well, kind of…"

"Kind of?" Satoru laughed. "There's only one self-destructing animal that lives in the wild. All the other ones have been modified by the queerats to be domestic animals."

"Isn't there a possibility?"

"For one thing, it's impossible. Before humans had cantus, they spent a long time modifying domesticated animals, but this only works for animals with naturally good qualities. For example, mellow animals, or animals with good milk production or those who can be modified to have good meat. Domesticating an explosive animal is extremely unlikely."

Satoru was being a know-it-all again. I wanted to argue, but my blood sugar was too low from hunger to come up with anything. I surrendered.

"Then what's a blowdog?"

"Ancient biology books talk about a self-destructing animal just like the blowdog. What do you think it is?"

"Umm…" I was quickly losing interest in the topic. It could be whatever it wanted to be. A tiger globefish or a black-spotted pond frog. I was starting to worry about the other three people.

"Ants," Satoru said triumphantly. "There's one type of ant in Malaysia that tears itself apart when an enemy approaches and releases a volatile substance into the air. It supposedly warns the nest that an enemy is nearby."

I was now going from hungry to dizzy. If we kept sitting here, I probably wouldn't be able to stand up again.

"Anyway, that's what it is. If normal animals blew themselves up one by one in order to repel an enemy, they'd wipe themselves out because they wouldn't have any offspring. But it's different for social animals like ants. Since an individual has no reproductive powers, it's beneficial for them to sacrifice themselves to protect the nest and queen. If you think about it that way, blowdogs don't exist outside of the ones that are mutated Ground Spiders…"

Satoru didn't seem hungry, tired, or worried at all about the other three. It was too much trouble to shut him up. As I slowly closed my eyes, I heard a faint noise.

"…so, the Ground Spider queen is able to freely produce a number of different mutants like the leaf fighters and the frog-looking guys. Out of all these, the blowdog looks like a totally different

species; its small head probably means it has limited intelligence about the same as a dog. In other words, in order to make them explode willingly and be unconditionally loyal, they must not be very smart…"

I heard it again. From behind. Sounds of dried twigs and grass being stepped on. Who…or what was there?

I put my finger in front of my lips and Satoru shut up immediately.

Behind me. A sound. I mouthed some words without making any noise.

Satoru hesitated, then stood up decisively and said loudly, "Who's over there!"

It was kind of a desperate ploy, but there was nothing else we could do. We had no weapons at the moment. If we ran, we'd be caught immediately. We had to pretend that we could still use our cantus.

"Gods, how far are you planning to go?" Squealer emerged from the shadows.

Our plan to attack the enemy while he was unprepared was ruined. I didn't think he would track us all the way here.

"Even though the Ground Spiders have been exterminated, it's still dangerous to walk around in the middle of the night."

"Why? Why did you follow us all the way here?"

Squealer cocked his head at my question. If he were human, he might've shrugged his shoulders. "If anything happened to the gods, I wouldn't be able to explain."

"We left by ourselves, isn't that fine?"

"No, it's not alright. Our colony would be crushed. And the Giant Hornet colony would not come out unscathed either. Going by past examples, General Kiroumaru would have to commit seppuku."

"What's seppuku?"

"Committing suicide by cutting your stomach open with a sword. It's used as the ultimate apology."

I was stunned. Our dictionaries did not have such a strange term, and we could never have imagined that people of the past would perform such actions.

"I see. I never imagined we would cause so much trouble," Satoru said meekly. "But that's only in a really unlikely scenario, isn't it? Like if we had an accident and died or something."

"Yes, but in order to prevent that unlikely possibility, I must protect the two gods no matter what."

Was he telling the truth, I thought as I looked at the ugly, naked rat.

"Is there anyone else following us?"

"No, just me."

"That's strange. If you're going to protect us, wouldn't you bring soldiers?"

"That…it was too sudden, so I didn't have time."

Satoru's question addressed both our suspicions of whether Squealer was under orders from Kiroumaru to keep an eye on us. Acting of his own will could be his plan to steal all the credit. Just two days ago, I doubt we would have been this paranoid.

"Anyway, are you thirsty?"

Squealer held out the gourd hanging by his waist. It sloshed with what sounded like water. We glanced at each other, but the temptation was too much to resist, so I took the gourd and uncorked it. We gulped down the lukewarm water. Instantly, my blood starting to circulate again, and I felt as if I were coming back from death. I passed the gourd to Satoru and he drank as well.

"And yet you had time to prepare this."

I wanted to express my gratitude to Squealer, but what came out of my mouth was a scathing comment.

"I took it from the soldiers as I rushed out after you. Taking one of these is no problem. As for the gods' protection, if another colony were to come along, there would be a lot of trouble."

Suddenly I realized that when I first took the gourd from Squealer, it had been full. He was undoubtedly thirsty as well after coming all this way.

"Thanks. You drink some too."

I took the gourd from Satoru and passed it over.

"Thank you." Squealer held it reverently in his hands and took a small sip.

In that moment, Satoru and I looked at each other and came to an unspoken agreement.

"Squealer, we need your help," I said.

He looked up immediately. "Of course, anything. Please tell me what I can do."

"We're trying to get to the west bank of Lake Kasumigaura. Please show us the quickest route."

"…but why are you in such a hurry? If you wait until tomorrow morning, the Giant Hornet guards will bring you there safely."

"Because if we wait until tomorrow, our lives will be in danger," Satoru said bluntly.

Squealer had probably been sold by Kiroumaru's promise to rebuild the Robber Fly colony, but unless we revealed everything to him right now, there was no chance of him coming to our side.

"What do you mean?"

"Kiroumaru might kill us."

"That will never happen! As β★ë◎Å …the queerats, and as the general of the largest colony, he would never think of harming the gods!"

"I can't explain, but trust us."

I took Squealer's hands. He seemed surprised, but didn't pull away.

"If that wasn't the case, we wouldn't be trying to run away in the middle of the night."

Squealer thought for a moment, then nodded gravely, "I understand. I will show you the route. However, pursuers will probably use the same path, so we must hurry."

Walking along the river running through the bottom of the valley felt much better than creeping along the precipitous mountain paths. Thanks to this we made good progress, but we were still under enormous pressure.

In the mountain, we never knew what was going to pop up in front of us, and it took considerable courage just to keep walking forward. But in the valley, our backs were exposed and there was nowhere to hide. It was unexpectedly frightening.

Moonlight barely reached the bottom of the valley. The river was black as ink, only the sound of rushing water could be heard. It drilled into my consciousness, until I couldn't tell if it was

coming from the river or from my own mind. The sound changed until it was like the war cries of an infinite fleet of queerats, or the roar of some other beast.

Satoru and I kept turning to check behind us to make sure there was nothing there. But far from assuaging our fears, the invisible river seemed to beckon us to the underworld.

"What's this river called?" Satoru's voice came from far away.

"The gods have not given it a name. We call it ∀Ξ☆ξ∋ …in Japanese it would mean, let's see, 'the forgotten river'."

"Why is it called that?" I asked. My voice was strangely hoarse, as if it were someone else talking.

"I'm not completely sure," Squealer said, sounding as though he was somewhere deep underground. "But there are a lot of rivers that empty into Lake Kasumigaura, like the Sakura River, and other larger and safer rivers. So it may just mean that the river has been forgotten."

"Hopefully Kiroumaru forgets about it too," I said, trying to lighten the mood.

"You can hope, but a great commander like him would never forget." Squealer's response was unexpectedly bitter. "The forgotten river is full of shoals and stones, so usually no one travels on it at night. That's one reason I chose this path. However, although this is a path General Kiroumaru doesn't often travel, he has won many battles here. For example the battle against the Army Ant colony, the Fall of Greenwall."

"Army Ant? There's such a colony?" Satoru asked.

"They don't exist anymore. Five years ago, they lost against the Giant Hornet colony and were completely wiped out."

It was pointless to tell us about this now, but hearing him talk seemed to help us stay focused.

"The Army Ant colony was over eighteen thousand strong, and praised as having the largest army. They excelled at siege warfare, and on this occasion had surrounded the Giant Hornets and set up camp. Near the end stage of the battle, the Army Ant general, Quikur, dispatched all but the queen's bodyguards."

Judging by his interest in wars, Squealer undoubtedly spent a lot of time reading historical records. He spoke animatedly.

"The Army Ant colony was stationed only a few kilometers away from the Giant Hornets. They could only move aboveground at this distance, and since their army was so big, the front line was already halfway there before the rear troops even left camp. Quikur decided to wait at the foot of the mountain for the rest of the soldiers to catch up. He assumed that the smaller Giant Hornet troops were hiding underground and dismissed the possibility of being attacked from the cliff that we locals call Greenwall. General Kiroumaru led his elite team secretly up the mountain and plotted an ambush. The enemy was right below the cliff that everyone assumed was too steep to climb. However, General Kiroumaru saw a gecko climbing across the bare rock, and said what would later become a famous quote, 'Geckos have four legs, we also have four legs. If a gecko can climb this mountain, there is no reason we cannot.'"

It was so absurd that I assumed Squealer was joking. But later, when I looked up the records of the queerat wars and learned that he had been telling the truth, I was speechless with shock.

"Through this, General Kiroumaru suddenly came into the spotlight. The first name the gods gave him was Kidoumaru, not with the characters 奇道丸, but 詭道丸", Squealer explained the two characters carefully.*

"I get it. In short, it means that there's nowhere to run when Kiroumaru is chasing you, right?" I hid my question behind a joke.

"Yes. If General Kiroumaru has seriously decided to pursue you, there's probably nothing you can do about it."

A short silence followed.

After seeing Kiroumaru order the devastation of the Ground Spiders, it was obvious that he was a fearsome strategist. If he caught up with us, we wouldn't stand a chance.

Everything depended on when Kiroumaru would start coming after us. There was a time gap from when the Ethics Committee sent their order to dispose of us by bat to the time the pursuers set out. If we were lucky, we could get to the canoes by that time. The only problem was that Kiroumaru might autonomously decide to come after us before the Committee's reply arrived if he found out we had run away.

It was possible he was chasing after us this very instant.

We unconsciously sped up. But there was a limit to how quickly we could go since the rocks by the river were slippery and dangerous.

Thirty minutes later, as we hurried along, dripping in sweat, Squealer came to a halt.

"What is it?"

Squealer put his hand to his lips and made a 'shh' sound. This strange gesture was seen even in ancient books, its meaning transcending time and place so that it was still understandable now. But I was surprised that it could even transcend species.

"Do you hear that?" Squealer asked quietly.

I listened carefully.

I heard it. A bird's cry. Although it was the middle of the night, it called as it wheeled through the sky.

Kyokyokyokyokyokyokyokyo…

It sounded more like a giant insect than a bird, and the sound filled me with unease. Following Squealer's example, we stood still as rocks. The strange bird flew along the river's path, circling above us over and over.

Satoru was the first to speak. "So what? It's just a bird."

"In the middle of the night though?"

"Maybe it's a nightjar. They're nocturnal like owls."

Was it really that simple?

"But why is it intentionally coming lower and lower?"

As expected, Satoru had no idea how nightjars behaved. He thought for a moment.

"Even though it's called a nightjar, it's probably not a predatory bird like owls and eats insects. It's catching insects by the river."

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*奇 (ki) has connotations of 'strange, mysterious, magical', 詭 (ki) means 'deceptive', and 道 (dou) means 'way, method'

Squealer, who had been silent until now, cleared his throat. "…this could be just a wild nightjar. But I strongly believe that it isn't."

"What do you mean?"

"General Kiroumaru tends to use birds as scouts. I've heard he uses nightjars because they have good night vision."

I was surprised. Now that I looked at it, the bird did seem like it was looking for something.

"Really? It's kind of hard to believe," Satoru said suspiciously. "How would a bird report that it had found something?"

"I'm not clear on the details either. But honeybees are able to transmit information about where flower are, so I'm sure it can be done with the right training."

If Squealer's theory was right, then Kiroumaru might be nearby already.

We hurried forward under a heavy silence.

Kiroumaru was probably close by, tracking us noiselessly. The reason he hadn't attacked could be because the Committee's response hadn't arrived yet, or that he wasn't yet aware that Satoru couldn't use his cantus anymore.

Or, he might simply be waiting for a better place to carry out his attack…

The more I thought about it, the more I felt the pressure of an unseen enemy.

But just as there is no unending night, all hardship must also come to an end. As we continued walking east, the sky began to lighten.

"Dawn…!" Satoru suppressed a shout.

"Lake Kasumigaura will be visible soon after we cross that," Squealer said, pointing to a large snaking river about two hundred meters ahead.

So maybe that really was a wild bird earlier. Just another part of our delusion that Kiroumaru was coming after us.

I felt relief for an instant.

"What…is that?" Satoru had noticed something.

We stopped in terror.

There on the sandy banks of the river, as if expecting our arrival, were a line of silhouettes.

8

We stopped abruptly. Fear and confusion washed over me in a wave.

There were three silhouettes. Looking in this direction.

False hope had gone to my head. Statistically speaking, there was only ever a fleeting, one in million chance of escape. But hope is like a flame–more prayer than logical thought, stronger than fear–that drives us to action.

Satoru and I looked at each other simultaneously, and nodded.

Slowly, we walked forward. Any path we could take would bring us closer to escape. This particular path would be to expose our weakness–the fact we couldn't use our cantus. Right now, all that mattered was to see who our enemy was.

As these thoughts ran through my head, I took one step, and another.

Looking at the black shadows, the desire to run away flared inside me once again, and my knees shook. Was I walking into the jaws of destruction?

No, it can't be. That, those shadows…I definitely recognize them. I'm positive. I kept telling myself this. But they stood without moving and I couldn't make out their identities.

A little closer and I would be able to tell. Just then, golden light spilled over the mountain ridge, blinding me with its rays.

The three figures were swallowed by the light.

I froze. But then.

"Saki! Satoru!"

I heard a shout. A voice I instantly recognized that I'd been longing to hear. Shun. Satoru dashed forward.

"Shun! Maria! Mamoru!"

I ran forward in a daze. Stumbling toward the light.

The five of us hugged and clapped each other on the shoulders, laughing and crying deliriously like idiots. In that instant, all the pain we had experienced, and all the suffering that was to come seemed a universe away. We reveled in the miracle that we were all unharmed and reunited.

I wished time could stop at that moment.

If time had frozen then, our team of five wouldn't have lost so many members…

"So, anyway, let's get to the canoes!" Shun was the first to get a hold of himself. "We can take our time to tell our stories then."

His words made me swallow the mountain of questions I was just about to ask.

Maria was startled by something behind me.

"What's over there?"

I patted her gently on the arm. "Oh, that's Squealer. He showed us the way here."

"Honored to meet you. I'm Squealer, from the Robber Fly colony."

The three were astonished at his fluent speech.

"The Robber Flies lost many of their soldiers while fighting the Ground Spiders and were one of the forces behind the Ground Spider's defeat," Satoru explained.

They looked surprised.

"The Ground Spiders are gone? Really?" Mamoru asked, his eyes wide.

"Yeah. The Giant Hornet army came and wiped them out. But we'll talk about this later. There's no time. Right now, we need to get to the canoes as soon as possible."

"W-wait."

Even Shun appeared to be having trouble wrapping his head around the situation. "If the Ground Spiders are gone, then isn't there no need to run anymore?"

"No. I'll explain later," I urged them forward.

"Then what in the world are we running from?" Maria asked, glancing at Squealer as he led the way forward.

"The Giant Hornet colony. From General Kiroumaru," Satoru answered.

"Huh? B-but, the Giant Hornets are loyal to humans, aren't they?" Mamoru asked with a dubious expression on his face.

"That's why they're dangerous," Satoru said, then fell silent abruptly.

Squealer was within earshot. We needed to be careful not to let slip exactly why we were going to be eliminated.

"I'll explain everything later. Just trust me."

The three of them looked skeptical, but nodded wordlessly. We had unwavering trust in each other. This was the first time I found that fact so reassuring.

Soon, we rounded a bend in the river. As Squealer had said, our field of view widened considerably. Just a little farther, the valley would end in a flat plain. And another kilometer after that, we might be able to see the Lake Kasumigaura, its water glittering in the sunlight.

Our spirits rose considerably, but it was too early for that. Ahead, Squealer suddenly stopped and cocked his head, listening carefully. We soon realized why.

From the valley behind us came a strange birdcall.

Kyokyokyokyokyokyokyokyo…

The nightjar.

My earlier assumption was proven correct. That was no wild bird. It was a spy sent by Kiroumaru to follow us.

"Run!" Satoru shouted.

Although there's no point in criticism after the fact, I still wonder whether the decision Satoru made at that moment was the correct one. Lake Kasumigaura was still quite a distance away, and even if we got there we would need additional time to find the canoes we had hidden among the reeds. Plus, running away would make us look guilty (thus giving our pursuers even more reason to come after us), and it may as well be an announcement to the world that we couldn't use our cantus.

But since we had already started running, there was no time to stop and discuss this. We fled down the valley to the plains, running until I thought my lungs would burst.

"Wait, a minute. I can't, run anymore!"

Embarrassingly, I was the first to stop. I was never a distance runner to begin with, and after all things I had gone through in the previous days, I was completely exhausted. Five humans and one queerat stopped, panting wildly.

"Just a bit more. I kind of remember this area. The shore should be behind those trees," Shun pointed to a grove two or three hundred meters ahead.

"Let's keep moving. Even if you can't run, just keep walking," Satoru said, taking my backpack from me.

I started forward, leading the way.

"What was that thing that sounded like a bird cry?" Maria asked.

"A nightjar. Spying for the Giant Hornet colony."

Maria looked like she doubted what I said.

"It's true. They have good night vision so they're used for night reconnaissance."

She seemed to accept Squealer's explanation. I thought it was kind of terrible of her to believe that ugly creature over her best friend.

"But it's already bright out," Mamoru looked up at the sky.

Under our feet, blue dayflowers were starting to bloom, still wet with the morning dew.

"They use different birds during the day, right?" Satoru asked Squealer.

The woods were starting to come alive with various birdcalls.

"Correct. I've heard they use crows during the day because they're more intelligent."

As if to interrupt us, a crow cawed loudly.

"Where did it come from?" Satoru looked around wildly.

"There! On that tree."

Maria had the best vision out of all of us. A hundred meters ahead was an ominous black shape perched on a withered tree.

"Are you sure? Is the crow really watching us?" Shun whispered doubtfully.

Upon closer inspection, the crow didn't seem to be paying particular attention to us.

"Anyway, let's just hurry. If we can get to the canoes before Kiroumaru shows up, we'll be okay."

Satoru hurried to walk next to me.

Traveling through a grove of oak and chestnut trees, we heard the faint sound of splashing water. The breeze changed directions and we smelled the unique odor of the lake coming from the east. We rushed recklessly onward.

Finally we arrived on the shores of Lake Kasumigaura. A sea of reeds rustled gently on the water's edge.

"Here!" Shun pointed at the area where the canoes were hidden and dashed forward.

We made to follow, but at that moment, a large shadow cut across the sky.

I looked up and saw a crow. Was it the one from before? It soared lazily four or five meters above us and landed on a pine branch. It looked over and crowed provocatively. It didn't seem to know how scary people could be.

It was a shame I couldn't use my cantus. I wanted to chuck a rock at its head. We waded through the reeds ankle-deep in the mud, looking for the canoes.

They were nowhere to be seen. I was pretty sure this was the right place. After searching fruitlessly for five minutes, I started getting impatient. The crow was still sitting on the tree, watching our every move and letting out ear-grating caws.

"Weird. It couldn't possibly have been washed away…"

Even Shun was starting to doubt himself. Then, help came from the most unexpected person.

"Found it!"

Mamoru's voice had never sounded so promising to me before. We extracted ourselves from the mud and ran in the direction of that jubilant voice.

The canoes appeared to have pulled free of their moorings and been blown around by the wind. If it hadn't been for the anchors sunk into the mud, they might have drifted away altogether.

We promptly raised anchor. As when we arrived, Satoru and I were in Sakuramasu 2. Maria and Mamoru were in Hakuren 4 and Shun was in Kamuruchi 7.

"Well, then. I will be departing," Squealer stood on the shore to watch us leave.

"Thank you. We couldn't have come this far without you," I thanked him sincerely.

At least, my feelings at that moment were real.

"I wish you a safe journey."

Squealer stood respectfully as the canoes moved slowly away from the banks.

"Let's go," Satoru said.

I turned around and put my paddle in the water.

This time, no one could use their cantus, so we had no choice but to manually row our way across the bay.

We started rowing clumsily. Once we reached the Tone River we could just ride the current downstream. But to get there we had to rely on our own strength.

Unfortunately, we made the mistake of overworking ourselves early on. There was still quite a distance to go, but we were all exhausted. My arms were painfully sore and my palms were blistered. It wasn't yet noon, but we were already burned from the unrelenting sun. The water I splashed on my face to cool myself evaporated within five minutes.

"Heeey, let's stop a bit," Shun called, looking worriedly back at us.

Although he was rowing by himself, he was still a lot faster than the rest of us.

"I'm doing fine," Satoru yelled back.

"We have a long head start. We should take a break while we can."

Even though I was impatient to get out of here, it was true that we hadn't had a good rest since yesterday. We decided to take Shun's advice and take a break.

By a stroke of luck, the clouds came out and drifted across the sun so we could look up at the blue sky as we lay back to nap on the canoe.

The rhythm of the waves lulled me half to sleep. But after narrowly escaping from the jaws of death part of me was still too wound up for me to fall asleep completely.

What were we going to do from now on?

We had learned the forbidden truths. If Satoru's theory was right, we were now targets for "removal". Was there any way to escape this fate?

I felt something slipping down my chest under my shirt. Reflexively, I held it down with my right hand.

I pulled it out and stared at it. It was a charm on a purple string. "Protection against karma demons" was embroidered in a complicated design on the front. This past spring, everyone from Sage academy had gone to visit the shrine and received a protective charm.

The teacher had told us never to open the charm, but it's human nature to want to do things the more you're told not to do them. Out of all the students who had been given a charm I was the quickest to submit to curiosity. I waited impatiently until I was alone, then opened the charm.

The charm wasn't sewn shut, but simply tied with string so I could easily take out its contents. Inside were a folded piece of white paper and a glass disc. Written on the paper in black in were strange words that looked more like pictures than writing. It gave me a creepy feeling so I quickly folded it again. I looked at the glass disc for a long time.

It was made of clear glass about five centimeters across and looked like a small galaxy. In the background were faint golden threads in woven geometric designs and different images seemed to float up to the surface. I saw small bamboo stalks that upon closer inspection also had tiny leaves and intricate red fruit. Next to it, pencils, cups, flowers and other familiar items floated by. And under all of these was a "purity mask".

"Purity masks" are masks made of damp clay and white chalk that children wear during the Demon-Chasing Festival. It resembles a human face but has no expression or individuality. But this mask was different. As I stared, I somehow saw my own face in it.

Lying in the canoe with my eyes closed, I felt the glass disc through the charm.

I turned quietly and peeked at Satoru. He was using his backpack as a pillow and seemed completely relaxed, rocking with the rhythm of the boat. Judging from his even breathing, he seemed to be dozing.

Although sticking your nose into things you're not supposed to see is a bad habit, at times it helps to calm me down. I opened the charm and took out the glass disc.

The light reflecting off the glass might attract attention from the others so I cupped the disc in my hand and looked into it.

How should I describe the uneasy feeling I had then?

That is, at first glance it seemed indefinably different. But I had looked at it enough that its composition was branded into my brain. But since I wanted the comfort it provided, I stared at it as if I wanted to eat it.

No. There was something different. It wasn't just my imagination that made originally perfectly balanced bamboo stalks seem crooked. Rather, it was the geometric designs in the back that were askew.

Then, when I focused on the purity mask, a shiver ran through my body.

It was melting… It was such a tiny change, and the result still looked like me, but the purity mask seemed to be slowly changing into a karma demon's face.

Instinctively, I threw the disc away from me, into the lake.

Hearing the splash, Satoru raised his head.

"What's up?"

"Nothing," I said, forcing a smile. "Shouldn't we get going?"

"Yeah."

Satoru called out a loud signal to the other canoes and we set off again.

What was happening to the face?

The feeling weighed heavily on me. Why was that face melting?

No, was it really melting? Doubt washed over me. Was it my imagination? Just an illusion caused by accumulated mental fatigue?

I suddenly regretted throwing the glass disc into the water. If I could just get another look at it, I'm sure it'd be back to normal.

No, it wouldn't. The chill I felt when I had seen it wasn't just my imagination. The face in the glass disc was indeed crumbling.

Then, why was that face, my face, changing? No, wait. That wasn't my face. The resemblance was just a coincidence since the charms were given out at random.

…but, was that really true? I stopped rowing and thought.

Although it looked unintentional, could the truth be that it had already been decided which charm each child would get? If not, then there was no need for us to line up in seat order and receive the charms one by one. They could have just passed the box around and had us each take one.

"Hey, Saki! Row properly," Satoru complained.

…given this theory, then the contents of each charm were different. The fact that the purity mask in my charm looked like me was no coincidence. Would the purity mask in every glass disc resemble the student it belonged to?

"Sakiiii."

"Alright, alright. I heard you."

I stuck my paddle in the water and lost myself in thought again.

Even so, what was it for? Every face was in a student's likeness. Was there some sort of meaning behind it?

No matter how hard I thought, I couldn't come up with an answer. All I could think of was that since they had put so much effort into this, then the charm wasn't just a charm, there must be something else to it.

Ever since we had run into the false minoshiro, my attitude toward the adults has changed completely. I suspected all their instructions to us were secret ways of screening us.

…even the charm could be a tool in controlling us. Saying that it protects against karma demons was just an excuse.

I dipped my handkerchief into the lake and put it on my head. Cold water ran down my forehead and evaporated before it got to my cheeks. I barely noticed, still deep in thought.

Unfortunately, I didn't get to ask the false minoshiro what the truth about karma demons was. But like the fiends, they seemed to be a real threat.

I began to understand. It was just a feeling, an instinct that I couldn't put into words yet.

Got it. Could the charm possibly be a karma demon detector? It could warn us if there was danger.

If we were near a karma demon.

Or…

"Saki!"

My train of thought was broken by Satoru's shout. For a second, I thought he was getting angry with me for how I was rowing but I quickly realized that wasn't the case.

A shadow flew over my head. I looked up and realized with a jolt that it was the crow from before. It let out a long cry and wheeled around, going back the way it came.

I turned around and scores of boats filled my vision, speeding toward us at full sail. At the center was a huge warship, at least three times longer than our canoe. The gunwale was filled to the brim with queerat soldiers.

"Saki…" Satoru's sigh was filled with resignation. "We've been caught. Look, there's Kiroumaru."

We held each other's hands and waited for the queerat ship to approach. Satoru's hand was damp with sweat. Mine probably was too.

We stared silently at the scenery of Lake Kasumigaura. The canoes sped across the lake much quicker than when we had been rowing them.

The three canoes were tied with thick ropes to the queerat warship. A group of strange triangular sails were raised as the ship sped forward across the water.

"I didn't know their ships were so advanced," Satoru said.

"Could it be that they're more advanced in this area than humans?"

"Well we have cantus. We don't need sails to propel a ship, right?"

No matter how big your sails are, there has to be a limit on how fast you can go. There's no such limitation with cantus.

"That's true…" Satoru crossed his arms and looked off into the hazy mountains.

"Who cares about the queerats. About what we were talking about earlier…"

"Yeah," Satoru pulled out the charm from his collar.

"Check it."

Satoru opened it without hesitation.

"Have you looked at it before?"

"Isn't it obvious? Who hasn't taken a peek at it?" He raised the disc to his eyes.

"So?"

Satoru's face went pale.

"Let me see."

"No," he said, grasping the disc so hard his knuckles went white.

"Is something different about it?'

"Yeah."

Satoru didn't elaborate, but I felt a little better. At least mine wasn't the only one that had changed.

"Could it have melted because of the heat?" I asked without conviction.

"No matter how hot it is or how weak the material is, it's impossible. Plus it's been in the sachet the whole time and hidden from the sun."

"Then why?"

"I dunno," his expression darkened. "Whatever it is, it can't be good…"

He fell silent looking at the opposite bank.

"I guess throwing it away is the best thing to do."

"Huh?"

Without a second's pause, he took off the charm and threw it in the lake. Dragged down by the weight of the glass disc, the cotton sachet sank slowly into the water.

"Wait, what are you doing?"

"It's fine, you did it too, Saki."

"Why?"

"If they find out when we get back, something bad might happen. The fact that the purity mask is melting is definitely a bad sign. Check Shun and the others. If there's any change, have them throw it away."

"But then we'll have no warning when a karma demon comes."

"We'll just have to deal with it when it comes then. We don't even know what a karma demon really is," Satoru said, his arms crossed.

"How will we explain it though? It's easy if it's just one person, but if a whole bunch of people lose their charms at the same time, it's too suspicious."

"Yeah. You're right…no, actually, it's fine! We can just say the Ground Spiders took them from us when we were captured. That way, Shun and them can say that they were captured too."

As expected of someone who was always up to no good. I complied, throwing the rest of my charm overboard. Come to think about it, there would have been no way to explain why only the glass disc had been thrown away instead of the entire charm. Without anything to weigh it down, my sachet floated on the water until it drifted out of sight.

As it disappeared, the queerat ship was arriving at its destination, our canoes in tow.

A Giant Hornet soldier disembarked and untied the ropes. The ropes were simply looped through a ring on the end of the canoes but you couldn't undo them from our side.

A remarkably large queerat appeared at the stern of the warship. Kiroumaru had arrived. Although his shoulder and back had been hurt in yesterday's explosion and were covered in bandages, he still moved around briskly, apparently unaffected by the injuries.

"How do you feel?"

"The trip was quite pleasant, thanks to you," I said.

Kiroumaru's wolf-like smiled reached all the way to his ears.

"Look over there. Where the sun's light dances on the water. That is the northern boundary of the Tone River. …I apologize, but we cannot get any closer. "

"Don't worry. We can make it on our own from here."

Thanks to the queerats towing us with their warship, we were able to cross the huge lake in around three hours. It would have been impossible to make it before sundown if we had to row ourselves.

But I wondered why they couldn't go any farther. Satoru looked a little dubious as well, but said nothing.

"Gods. Gods," Squealer appeared behind Kiroumaru. "This is where we truly part. I will pray for your safe journey."

I wasn't sure how to feel about this. Of course, he appeared to be worried about us. But I suspected that he had been on Kiroumaru's orders all along. First to lead us through the forest, and then to disclose our location.

"…you too. Take care. It'll be great if you can rebuild your colony," I squashed my suspicions and tried to reply sincerely.

As we set off, I heard Kiroumaru's voice behind me.

"I have a request."

"What is it?" Satoru asked.

"Once you return, please do not divulge that I towed your canoes."

"Why?" It was an honest question.

"I can't say, but if this were revealed then I would be sentenced to death," Kiroumaru said, his eyes glinting with a seriousness he had not shown even in battle.

"I understand. I'll keep it a secret," Satoru said quietly.

I didn't know whether it was because we had rested and regained our strength, or due to the swift currents, but the canoes traveled steadily down the river. When we looked back, the warship was already a speck in the distance.

"Kiroumaru risked his life to help us," I said more to myself than to Satoru.

"Yeah. I'm sure he received orders from the Committee to restrain us," he sounded rather proud that his theory had been correct. "That's definitely also the reason he turned back where he did. The ship's sails are visible from far away, so if there happened to be someone watching, they would know that he had his ignored orders and helped us."

"But why…?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Satoru smiled as if mocking me for not understanding something so simple. "Because we saved him yesterday. If I hadn't dealt with the blowdogs, Kiroumaru would be as dead as Rijin right now."

"Hey!" Shun shouted in front.

"Hey! We're leaving now!" Satoru shouted back.

Hearing his voice suddenly opened a dam inside me. It was as if the past three days were no more than a dream, and we were just rowing down the river to in summer camp.

"Hey, Saki! What's wrong? Hey…" Satoru sounded confused as I continued to cry, and then started laughing at the same time.

My meltdown went on for ten minutes. We soon reached the other canoes and it spread to Maria as well, turning into uncontrollable mayhem.

When I had finally cried to my heart's content, I felt much better (though the boys seemed rather tired). We entered the northern reaches of the Tone River and started going downstream. After that it was smooth sailing all the way back to the town…or that's what I would like to say, but in reality all sorts of troublesome situations kept popping up. First, we had no experience navigating down a river without our cantus. And as our mental and physical fatigue reached its peak, the sun started setting making it hard to see. And the straw that broke the camel's back was our canoe sinking from smashing too often into the rocks and each other. It was a miracle that no one died.

When the dark curtain of night fell, the river changed again. The starlight shimmered on its obsidian surface, giving the illusion that we were frozen in place, but the roar of the water made it seem like the gentle current was becoming more violent.

I felt this instinctive discomfort. It was a feeling going back before I was born, an ancient memory left over from our cave-dwelling ancestors.

Exploring this feeling more carefully, I would say that it was a need to return home as soon as possible. Satoru and I both felt a strong anxiety toward something that awaited our return. Be that as it may, given our physical conditions right now, it would be suicidal to continue down the river at night. We had no choice but to make camp, but couldn't find a good spot for a long time. I remembered a dry riverbed we had passed by right before the sun set and felt a flicker of annoyance. Everyone had wanted keep going as far as we could, so we continued on without stopping even though we already knew that it was impossible to get back to the town even if we rowed nonstop. We should have stopped then.

We were exhausted when we finally found a place to set up the tents. It was so close to the river that if the water rose just a little we would be immersed, and the rocks were too uneven to make a nice bed. So needless to say, it was not a great spot.

We used the last of our strength to set up the three tents by hand. We dug holes for the tent poles and covered them with canvas, tying it in place with leather straps. Somehow we couldn't get it to look as good as it did on the first day of camp.

"Weird. Why can't we get it right?" Satoru grumbled tiredly.

"We used our cantus that time," Shun said, still struggling with the tent.

Come to think of it, he was right. That was just three days ago but it felt more like an eternity.

"Satoru, you still can't use your cantus?" I asked, grasping for a ray of hope.

He shook his head. "Umm. I'm too tired to concentrate, but if it's just a little, I think I can manage."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Maria interrupted, completely lost.

I told them about how I remembered Satoru's mantra and managed to hypnotize him and restore his cantus.

"I see! So if we know our mantra, we'll be able to get our power back," Shun said excitedly. "That monk completely got us with his bluff. His hypnosis was no big deal! Even Saki could undo it."

Saying 'even Saki' was unnecessary.

"But do you guys even know your mantra? I only happened to know Satoru's by chance," I looked around at them.

It was dark but I could still make out their expressions.

"I know mine," Shun said.

"Eh? How?"

"I remembered it using various methods. But no matter how many times I chanted it in my mind, my cantus wouldn't come back. I guess you still need the hypnosis to release it."

Our mantras had been stolen; in other words, the goal of the hypnotic suggestion was to make us forget it, so the fact that Shun managed to remember it on his own is astonishing. Shun's explanation was that he had various mnemonic devices so that if he ever forgot his mantra, he would be able to rediscover it.

"I can't remember mine though," Maria said dejectedly.

"Did you write it down anywhere?"

Maria, Mamoru and I looked at each other.

"I did." I remembered that I had carved it on a charm and hidden it under the floorboards.

"Me too."

"Me too…it's in my diary."

Each syllable of our mantra was sacred, so we were forbidden to let anyone else know what it was. Strictly speaking we weren't even supposed to write it down. But the three of us didn't trust something so important to just our memories and had all recorded it in some form. And Satoru and I showing each other our mantra was so egregious as to be unthinkable for any other team. In hindsight, this was further proof that our team was made up of special students.

"Then we'll be fine. When we get back to the town, Satoru and I will show them that we can use our cantus. That way they wouldn't think that we had it sealed. The rest of you can say you're too tired and go back home. Then after you've found your mantra, find Saki and she'll restore your cantus."

Shun's words cleared away all my worries in an instant. Although I wasn't happy that Rijin had been killed by the queerats, I couldn't deny the fact that dead men tell no tales.

We cheered up considerably at this. With Satoru levitating the canvas, we set up the three tents. We gathered dried branches, built a fire, and cooked a meal of rice gruel. The food was even more tasteless than the dinner we had made the first day we arrived, but it seemed like the most delicious thing in the world.

After we ate, we sat around the fire and took turns talking about what happened while we had been separated. Shun, Maria and Mamoru's story was completely unexciting. After Satoru and I had been captured by the Ground Spiders, they followed in an attempt to rescue us, but soon realized that there were too many guards and decided to go back to the town for help. They tried to travel during the day, but were so startled by the sounds of war that they spent most of their time hiding in

the bushes. When everything fell silent at night, they crossed hurried toward Lake Kasumigaura. When we caught up with them, they were so overjoyed that, in Maria's words, "I thought I was being tricked by a tanuki."

In contrast, our story kept them mesmerized the entire time. They questioned us relentlessly about when we were in the Ground Spider's cage and the part where we killed the sentry, but fell silent when we started talking about the Robber Flies being attacked and how we wandered through the underground tunnels. They cheered when Satoru miraculously recovered his powers at the last minute and launched an all-out counterattack, but went fell silent again in mute amazement as the situation evolved beyond their wildest imagination.

Since Satoru was the storyteller, I was left to correct and supplement his story. Satoru prided himself on being a talented storyteller, but he usually bluffed so much that I thought I would have to retell half the story. It was a needless worry. The three of them listened like a group of children, with their mouths half open and eyes shining with amazement.

There was silence when Satoru finished his tale, filled with only the sound of the crackling flames. Then someone opened their mouth and the dam was released. Among all the questions thrown at us, the one everyone was most interested in was why we had been so keen on running away from Kiroumaru when he had protected us.

Satoru explained again. I was prepared for a violent response to the news that the Ethics Committee had probably marked us for elimination, but they took it rather well. It helped that Shun seemed to agree with me that Satoru was over-thinking the whole thing. Plus, we were all in such a good mood right now that the shock was diminished. If everything went as Shun said, we would be able to hide everything about Rijin sealing our cantus. The most we would have to endure was a scolding from our teacher.

"Saki, I'm counting on you," Shun passed me a scrap of paper. "Please restore my cantus."

I took a deep breath and nodded.

I unfolded the paper and read it by the light of the campfire. It was a rather long mantra, a total of eight phrases, or thirty-six characters. I had planned on burning the note as soon as I read it, but with a mantra this long, I wasn't positive I could remember it. I crumpled the note in my hand.

It's okay. I can do it. I just have to repeat what I did to Satoru. I tried calming myself with these words. In reality though, there are three major differences in these two instances. For one, Shun was completely conscious. Furthermore, he'd be fully aware that I would be hypnotizing him, and he already knew his mantra. But I didn't think of any of this at the time.

"Look at the flames."

I called up my memories of the initiation ceremony, and directed Shun's attention to the campfire. Head Priest Mushin had told me to imagine moving the flames, but it probably wouldn't have the same effect on someone whose cantus had been sealed.

"Look at the flickering flame. Right. Left. Swaying…flickering," I whispered.

Shun kept silent. The other three watched me with bated breath.

I stirred the fire with a long branch, scattering bright sparks. I wasn't expecting it to replicate the same effect of the flames in the altar, but the sparks left traces in the air, creating a dreamy mood.

"Shun Aonuma."

He didn't move an inch. I couldn't tell if he had been hypnotized or not.

"Shun Aonuma. You have broken the rules coming to a place you do not belong. Furthermore you have been swayed by the words of a demon. However, the real problem is much greater."

There was no response.

"You have violated the foundation of the Code of Ethics, the last of the Ten Precepts, 'do not desecrate the Three Jewels'. You have fallen for the words of a demon and questioned the teachings of Buddha. Therefore I must seal your cantus."

I thought I heard Shun sigh. It seemed to be working. I continued a little uncertainly.

"Look at the flames once again."

No answer.

"Look into the flames."

There was still no response, but I could see the fire reflected in his eyes.

"Your cantus is sealed in that human emblem. Do you see it?"

A much louder sigh this time, then, "Yes."

"The emblem is cast into the fire. Everything is burned away. All your worldly desires are burned away, and the ashes return to the vast, wild earth." I took a deep breath and said loudly, "The emblem has been eradicated. Your cantus is now sealed!"

A small choked sound came from the back of Shun's throat. His breathing sped up.

"Cast aside your worldly desires. To reach nirvana, cast everything into the cleansing flame."

It was time. I stood up and went closer to him.

"Shun Aonuma. In your devotion to Buddha, you have abandoned your cantus. By the compassion of Buddha, you will receive a new mantra, a new spirit, and your cantus will be returned to you!"

I hit him on the shoulders and whispered the words written on the paper.

"Oṃ amogha vairocana mahāmudrā maṇipadma jvāla pravarttaya hūṃ."

Later I found out that these words came from the Buddha himself; it was the Mantra of Light. This alone was a clear indicator of Shun's talents. He was born with the expectation of becoming a future leader.

Suddenly the fire flared up to three times its previous size and fanned out like an eight-headed serpent, twisting and meandering through the air like some strange dance.

Shun was smiling, looking up at the fire. We broke into applause, clapping, stamping, and whistling. The cheering didn't stop for a long time. Shun had recovered his cantus.

III

Deep Autumn

1

We spent a sleepless night on the rocky banks of the river. As tired as we were, there was a lingering unease in our minds that prevented us from falling asleep. Still, we managed to doze off enough to recover a bit of energy.

The next day, we set off as soon as the sun rose. As we traveled downstream, I realized that our camp had been right next to Kamisu 66. It was so close that we didn't really need to stop last night. But given our condition yesterday, maybe it was a good idea we hadn't continued.

In the morning sun, the Tone River glittered a dazzling gold, as if celebrating our return. What happened to the black river of Hades we had been struggling with just a few hours earlier?

We stopped paddling and let the current carry us along.

The scenery gradually became more familiar. Although I was eager to go home, the closer we got to town, the more apprehensive I felt.

I was sure that we would be met with an entourage of boats to take us in, but didn't see anyone even as we passed Ikisu Shrine.

With such an anticlimactic response, we relaxed considerably.

Though maybe we should have been more alarmed. It was actually very unusual to not see a single boat this early in the morning.

As we arrived in Hayring at the dock we had set out from four days ago, someone finally came out to greet us.

"You're back early."

It was the Sun Prince, also known as Mr. Endou. His bushy beard concealed his face in such a way that I couldn't tell if he was smiling that we were back safe or scowling at us for breaking the rules. Quitting partway through the weeklong camp wasn't that unusual; it was the reason for quitting that was the issue.

"Sorry. Some unbelievable things happened…" Shun said in a choked voice.

The rest of us nearly started crying.

"Well, well, let's talk about this later, okay? Dock the canoes for now."

We held back our tears and went ashore. The ropes tying our equipment undid themselves and our supplies flew through the air to line up neatly on the dock.

"Oh, we'll do it," Satoru said.

The Sun Prince shook his head, "It's alright. You're all tired, aren't you? Anyway, you should get to the children's center. Breakfast is being served soon."

I vaguely wondered why we had to go to the children's center. It was right next to the docks and had a resting area as well as rooms for overnight stays, but none of us had set foot in it after graduating from Harmony School.

"Sir, we'd really like to go home…" Shun spoke for all of us.

"Ah, yes, I understand. But before that there are some things we need to ask you about."

"Can't we go home and rest for a bit?" Maria pleaded.

I was dying to take a bath, but the Sun Prince was adamant.

"Listen to me, okay? Don't forget that you guys have broken some serious rules. I know you're tired, but we have to take care of important things first."

He was smiling as kindly as ever but the tip of his nose glistened with sweat.

"I understand."

We shuffled toward the children's center.

"Saki, what do you think about this?" Satoru muttered in my ear.

"'Bout what?"

"The Sun Prince's face is all stiff. And isn't it weird how he's forcing us to go to the children's center?"

"Yeah, but the entire situation is weird…"

I was so numb from fatigue that I felt disconnected from my body. Satoru was annoying me asking such obvious questions. Yes, it was weird. What the hell did he want me to do about it?

Shun opened the glass door with his cantus. I was extremely grateful to him for this. No doubt he was just as tired as the rest of us and would have preferred opening the door manually instead of using even more energy to concentrate his cantus, but he wanted to show the Sun Prince, and anyone else who was watching, that we had not all lost our powers.

As the Sun Prince said, breakfast was being prepared. There were pots of warm rice, salted salmon, tiger crab miso soup, raw eggs, seaweed, salad, and preserved kelp. Even dessert, brown sugar jelly, was in the works.

I was suddenly starving. We filled our bowls and started eating voraciously.

For a while, we were silent.

"We actually made it back okay…" Mamoru said earnestly.

"Okay? We don't know what'll happen later on," Satoru said darkly.

"But we're back, in any case," Maria put her hand on Mamoru's shoulder.

I agreed with the two of them. "Yeah, we might have over-thought the whole thing."

"What do you mean?" Maria asked.

"Well, even after learning all those horrible things from the false minoshiro, nothing's happened…"

"Sh!" Shun cut me off. "Someone might be listening."

"Oh, sorry." I clamped my mouth shut. For some reason I was feeling happy and talkative.

"Wait. Maybe…in this," Shun eyed his half-finished breakfast with extreme distrust.

As if by telepathy, we all understood what he was thinking.

Could they have put something in the food? Something that would relax us and make us spill everything we were hiding.

Satoru pointed decisively at the bowl of jelly. While everyone else had been eating the main portion of their breakfast, I had been unable to wait and already started on dessert. It did have a slight alcoholic smell, but there could be other drugs mixed in as well.

"Hah?"

As our attention was on the bowl of jelly, Mamoru looked out the window and made a strange sound.

"What happened?"

Ignoring Maria's questions, he started toward the window. At that instant, I saw a large shadow flicker across the window.

Mamoru pressed his face to the glass and peered outside. He turned back. There was a bone-chilling look of fear on his face I had never seen before.

The clock chimed eight times. I realized something strange. Even though it was already eight in the morning, I didn't hear any children around. And I couldn't, no matter how hard I tried. We were still the only ones at the center.

The heavy silence continued. Mamoru still refused to say what he had seen.

"Thanks for waiting, you guys," the Sun Prince came in through the door along with a middle-aged couple I recognized but had never spoken to.

I was sure they were also from the Board of Education.

"I see you've finished breakfast? If you're tired, we can rest a while," the woman said, smiling. The forced smile magnified the horse-like features of her mouth.

"Starting now, you will be interviewed one at a time. So, who will go first?"

No one spoke.

"Come now, what's wrong? Team one is supposed to be the most assertive team. Aren't you always the first to answer questions in class?" the Sun Prince said, sounding cheerful as always. But his eyes weren't smiling.

In the end, we went by seat number. Shun Aonuma, Maria Akizuki, Satoru Asahina, Mamoru Itou, and me, Saki Watanabe.

Until then I had never noticed the row of small, two-tatami rooms at the back of the children's center. We went in one at a time, accompanied by the two interviewers.

…I've been thinking about what had happened then, but strangely enough, I can't remember a single thing. In the ancient psychology books, this is called lacunar amnesia. Satoru doesn't remember much either. The only thing I can recall is being offered a really bitter tea. So that, plus whatever was in the jelly, made it more of a drugged interrogation than an interview.

In any case, we all finished the "interview" and were allowed to go home. According to Shun's plan, Mamoru, Maria, and I were supposed to pretend to be sick as an excuse to go straight to our rooms. But that turned out to be unnecessary, since all three of us developed a high fever that day and were confined to bed.

My fever abated after a day or two, but my parents forced to me rest more, so I spent about a week lazing around in my pajamas. Since I couldn't meet up with the other two, I dug up the charm hidden under the floorboards to find my mantra.

I felt the rush of victory as I chanted my mantra and unsealed my cantus. After all, I had succeeded in fooling all the adults and recovered my god-like power.

I never could have imagined how mistaken I was.

To a forty-year-old adult, two years might not be a big deal. At most, their hair might become a little greyer, their bodies a little stiffer, a little heavier, or their breath a little shorter. That's what happens to most in two years' time.

But for twelve-year-old children of any era, drastic changes can happen within two years.

For me, being fourteen was more than just growing five centimeters and gaining six kilograms. Or for boys, an even more radical thirteen centimeters and ten kilograms. That's just on the outside. There were changes within us as well.

I gradually became accustomed to looking up to Satoru and Shun. It wasn't a bad thing, but was a surprise to me. Ever since I could remember, they were my good friends as well as competitors, but at some point, they became something else. And it was a completely natural change.

When I came to realize it, I was far behind them, chasing after their retreating figures. It was a strange sight, tinged with an unexplainable feeling.

No, I know exactly what it was. Jealousy.

Since the beginning Shun has always been special to me. I couldn't tear my eyes from him that day as the sun set over the field and the wind ruffled his hair. His clear voice and sparkling eyes never failed to enchant me. I always believed without a shadow of doubt that Shun and I would be together.

On the other hand, Satoru was as plain as you could get. I admit that he's smart, but compared to Shun who overflowed with so much talent that you could sense it in the air around him, Satoru was nothing special. Still, ever since we had survived the Ground Spider attack together, my view toward him has changed as well. He was always friendly and the most comfortable person for me to be around.

That's why my jealousy was so complicated. Seeing them together made me feel left out.

But what had changed the most in the last two years was probably the relationship between Shun and Satoru. Although they were never on bad terms, Satoru always viewed Shun as something of a rival, and sometimes acted awkwardly around him.

However, his feelings toward Shun had changed completely these past two years. Before, he would always turn away from Shun's bright smile, but now, more often than not, Satoru would smile back, gazing deep into Shun's eyes.

I was always aware that I was in love with Shun. And I could clearly see the romantic feelings Satoru had when he hugged Shun.

On the other hand, I couldn't tell what Shun thought of Satoru. Growing up with his good looks and intelligence, he was already used to people admiring him. So he had a calm, or to put it bluntly, a certain tolerant attitude toward his admirers. But watching the two of them, it wasn't just

Satoru blindly longing for Shun. I would say that even though Satoru was the proactive one, Shun did seem to accept his feelings.

The final conclusion came from what I saw one day in the field. I suddenly spotted the two of them walking along like lovers, hand in hand, unaware of the world around them.

I turned on my heel and made to leave. But my curiosity betrayed me and I found myself following them at a distance. I knew I would be hurt if I saw them being intimate, but I couldn't stop myself.

Once out of sight of the town, the two began frolicking like puppies. Or to be specific, Satoru pranced around Shun, hugging him from behind. I was suddenly keenly aware that I would love to have been born a boy. If I had been, Shun would choose me over Satoru in a heartbeat.

The Ethics Committee and Board of Education were extremely strict about relations between adolescent boys and girls. So for kids of our age, we were limited to strictly platonic relationships with the opposite sex.

However, they seemed to look extremely generously upon even the most intimate same-sex acts. So apart from a few people, everyone defaulted to a homosexual relationship.

They crested the hill and lay down on a field of white clovers to talk. I hid in a clump of bushes twenty or thirty meters away and watched, not daring to breathe.

It appeared that Satoru told a joke, as Shun threw his head back and laughed, showing pearly white teeth.

Satoru stared for a second, then suddenly threw himself on top of Shun. For a while, they didn't move.

I couldn't see them clearly from my position, but I had no doubt that they were kissing. Satoru held Shun tightly. For a moment, Shun simply lay there. Finally, he returned the embrace and began playing with Satoru's body, trying to flip him over so that he would be on top. Satoru resisted. They struggled, but Satoru had the advantage. Shun finally gave up and slumped back onto the ground with the expression of a girl who was resigned to her fate.

Seeing this, Satoru went completely mad. He pinned Shun to the ground and kissed him passionately on his lips, cheeks, throat, and neck.

I flushed just seeing this and started running my hands over myself unconsciously. I didn't know whether it was because of how affectionate Satoru was being with Shun or because I wanted to be in Satoru's position. Whichever it was, or maybe because I was the odd one out, my heart burned unbearably in my chest.

Satoru traced his fingers lovingly over Shun's lips. Meeting no resistance, or perhaps getting carried away, he stuck a finger into Shun's mouth and made him suck on it. Shun allowed such a rude imposition with a generous smile, but still nipped Satoru's fingers with his teeth from time to time.

Caught up in the heat of the moment, I leaned forward a bit too far. As Shun raised his head to pretend to bite Satoru's hand, I felt him notice me for a split second.

With a start, I withdrew into the shadow of the bushes. But he had probably seen me. I thought I would die of shame. I stayed hidden for a while, but decided that I would look one more time to check on the situation.

Satoru was lying on top, trying his best to pull Shun's pants off. An enraptured look came over his face as he uncovered Shun's thighs, as perfect as if carved from pure white marble. Then, as though handling a small animal, he gently began rubbing Shun's penis.

Shun laughed and squirmed as if he were being tickled, but didn't really resist.

I guess I only imagined him noticing my presence.

Without standing up, I turned and crept away. If I kept watching, I'd go crazy.

I had a pretty good idea of what was going to happen anyway. Earlier I had accidentally seen two boys from team three making love with each other.

At that time, I had observed out of simple curiosity. It was obvious that the two were too sex-crazed to notice anything else. They lay on top of each other in opposite directions, each with the other's penis in his mouth. Occasionally, it went so deep into their throat that even I felt like throwing up. But it didn't seem to be enough for them. Obviously, as boys, they couldn't have sex the proper way, but it didn't stop them from trying. The sight of their penises thrusting violently reminded me of minoshiro mating.

I had zero interest in seeing Shun and Satoru engage in such a stupid act.

Feeling miserable, I left the area. I wanted more than anything for someone to comfort me. One person came to mind.

I went looking for Maria after I got back to town and found her at home on the back porch. Thankfully, all her family members seemed to be out, but there was still an annoying third wheel. Mamoru.

"Saki, what's wrong?" she asked in a bright, clear voice.

In the past two years, Maria had grown into a young woman with beautiful arched eyebrows, sparkling eyes, a straight, perfect nose, and expressive mouth who carried herself with confidence and determination. The only thing that hadn't changed was her flame-red hair.

"I just suddenly wanted to talk to you," I said, smiling at her while throwing Mamoru a cold look.

Mamoru avoided my gaze and slid out of sight.

Maria sat on the veranda, swinging her feet off the side. Mamoru sat a little distance away, concentrating on drawing Maria. He wasn't drawing with pencil and paper like we did in Harmony School. Instead, he had a wooden board spread with a thin layer of white clay and was using his cantus to draw with powdered stones such as garnet, fluorite, beryl, cordierite, and columbite.

The portrait didn't just look like Maria, but also managed to capture her spirit. Even I had to admit that he had an amazing talent.

Mamoru had lost his mother to typhoid fever when he was young, and seemed to view Maria as a surrogate since both had red hair, a rare trait in our town. According to Satoru, red hair was never an Asian trait, so Mamoru's mother and Maria's possibly mutual ancestors must have come from a distant country many generations ago.

From what I remember, Mamoru became attached to Maria right after we entered Sage Academy. But even now, during puberty, he showed no interest toward his own sex, no matter how many cute boys approached him. He lived in the westmost town of Oakgrove while Maria lived on the eastern coast in Whitesand. Even so, Mamoru took a boat to meet Maria at her house every

morning. Although his devotion was touching, at our age, relationships with the opposite sex were a huge taboo, so Mamoru had to use drawing as an excuse to visit her.

He was always with Maria and paid no attention to anyone else. As for Maria, she seemed moved by his affection and the two of them gradually grew closer. Actually their relationship looked more like one between a master and her loyal dog.

But since I was universally recognized as Maria's lover, Mamoru's life was sometimes rather depressing.

"Hey, let's go for a walk," I said, hinting that I wanted to be alone with her.

"Okay, sure," she smiled understandingly.

"Alright, we're gonna go for a bit…Mamoru you should take a break."

Mamoru looked miserable at the prospect of Maria and I going off alone.

"Thank you, it's beautiful. I love it," Maria said, taking a quick look at the painting.

Mamoru's face lit up with joy for a second. He was always dead silent in front of me. Maybe he was embarrassed to let other girls see how devoted he was to Maria. Since he was always so quiet, I had gotten into the bad habit of completely forgetting his existence around Maria.

We walked to a small boat anchored on the river. It was one of the town's communal boats, painted with a blue dolphin on the side, which anyone could use as long as they returned it to one of the designated docks when they were done.

I pushed off with my cantus. As we glided over the water, Maria untied her hair and let it fan out in the breeze.

She put her arms around my neck and whispered, "What's wrong?"

Her gentle voice nearly brought me to tears.

"Nothing, really. I just wanted to see you."

She knew it was a lie, but didn't press further. Maria ran her fingers through my hair, untangling all my worries along with it.

We were heading for a little hill overlooking the Hamasaki sand dunes that was surrounded by bushes and provided perfect secrecy. In Harmony School we would often spend the afternoons there when the weather was nice. Back then, I was the first to suggest taking off our clothes, but Maria was the one who bravely stole a kiss from me as we lay naked together.

After docking, we raced up the dunes. I was worried that someone may have discovered our hiding spot since we hadn't gone there for a while, but thankfully it looked untouched.

Although I knew for sure that we were completely hidden from view, we still made a check of our surroundings before taking off our clothes. At first I felt a little embarrassed, but our laughter as we slowly undressed each other made me feel like I had returned to my innocent childhood days.

It wasn't quite yet summer, so the air was a little chilly. We rubbed the goosebumps on each other's arms.

"Saki, your breasts have gotten bigger," Maria suddenly grabbed me from behind.

"…that tickles," I squirmed away.

She chased after me, putting her hands all over my body. At some point, she managed to take off my bra.

"Ugh, stop," I couldn't stand the feeling and crouched on the ground, arms around my knees.

"What are you talking about? Isn't this what you want? That's why you came to me, right?"

I laughed, shook, and writhed under her relentless attacks. It was a fine line between happiness and suffering, loving caresses and torture.

"Well. Since I haven't seen you for a while, I need to inspect your body properly. What's changed since the last time? Have you fully developed?"

"Enough. You don't have to…!"

As I was talking, Maria ran her soft fingers up and down my body. Her fingers were so nimble it felt as if there were a thousand hands touching me.

"Hm. Such a beautiful body. Not an extra ounce of fat anywhere, and so soft."

"U-uh. Are you done? It's your turn now…"

"Mm, I'll let you look as much as you like later. But I still need to check your sensitivity."

She went on like this for thirty minutes. I laughed and begged her to stop until I was completely out of breath.

"Amaaazing. You actually enjoy all this teasing don't you. Your entire body is responding to the pleasure."

I couldn't even come up with words to deny it. I glared accusingly at her through bleary eyes.

"Heh, how cute," Maria smiled at me, her face only a hair's breadth from mine.

She slowly pressed her lips against mine. Aah. How do I describe this softness? Until then, I had kissed a number of boys and girls, but never felt anything like this before. For many people, their mouths tense up if they're nervous or if they're consciously trying to control it, but Maria's lips were like marshmallows, slowly enveloping my own. Just this was enough to melt me, but then she parted my lips and slipped her tongue in my mouth. This raw sensation always gave me goosebumps. She explored my mouth, running her tongue over the backs of my teeth, the insides of my cheeks, and finally, my tongue. Our senses melded together, touch with touch, taste with taste.

I gave myself up to her completely; all I wanted was to remember the sensation of her tongue. Maria's every move was an expression of her own desires, and soon I would be expected to reciprocate.

The two of us lay entwined, knees bumping against knees, hardened nipples pressed against each other.

She slid her hand below my stomach, lightly stroking the soft hair, then moved down farther. I was embarrassed that she would feel how wet I was and tried to pull away. It was a fruitless attempt, of course.

"Oh? Why are you so excited?" Maria asked innocently, as if she didn't know that it was entirely her fault.

"U….uun," I tried to protest, but no words came out.

Without waiting for an answer, she reached a finger into me. Into every girl's most sensitive area, a little bump no bigger than a pearl. She teased it with gentle circular motions, and my mind went blank. I had melted to the very core of my body.

Time passed, flowing thickly like honey. Maria and I forgot about the rest of the world, lost in our intense lovemaking. For the second half, I took charge, rendering Maria speechless, tears flowing down her face as she writhed with pleasure.

Our actions were not considered taboo, but one thing that was strictly prohibited was penetration. At the end of every term, the school nurse would check to make sure that all the girls were still virgins. If the hymen was discovered to be broken, the student would be questioned, and if the reason was that it was caused by impure heterosexual intercourse, she would be expelled.

At that time, there wasn't anyone around us who had been forced to leave school for this reason. There was only a rumor that it had happened to a girl about seven years ago. It was said that she was never seen again after that incident, but like many of Satoru's stories, there was no source for the legend, so its legitimacy was questionable.

After we were done, Maria and I lay back on the sand, covered in sweat. I suddenly remembered something the false minoshiro had said. In order to rid the society of violence, we had decided to change the structure of our society to one based on love, like the bonobos…

Since that summer, many of the things central to our lives started to go slightly awry. But these warnings were ignored as we were busy struggling with all the changes in our bodies caused by puberty.

What exactly was the first sign? I can't remember, but there seemed to be a general feeling of unease and unexplained irritation. Maria was plagued with frequent headaches, and I often felt nauseous when I was tired. Everyone else also had some sort of physical discomfort though we all thought they were nothing more than growing pains.

Meanwhile, one relationship was the first to meet its demise.

I found out when I happened to come across two people in town.

Shun was walking quickly along the path next to the canal with Satoru chasing after him. What caught my attention was Shun's attitude. It was considerably more distant than the last time I had seen him with Satoru.

"Hey, give me another chance," Satoru touched Shun's shoulder but was brushed away coldly. "Shun, what's wrong?" his voice carried clearly on the wind. He sounded almost embarrassingly flustered.

"Nothing. I just want to be alone for a while," he said flatly.

"I know it's my fault. Please…" Satoru grasped Shun's shoulders.

"Your fault? For what?" Shun smiled coldly.

"I…"

Poor Satoru looked totally lost. This was the first time in my life I actually sympathized with him and felt slightly revolted by Shun.

"Satoru, isn't it time to end this farce of a romance? I've had enough of being your doll."

Satoru looked dumbstruck. "O-oh. I understand. From now on…"

"You don't understand anything. Having you follow me around the clock is suffocating. I want to be alone. So we should go our separate ways from now on. Goodbye," Shun said quickly, pushing Satoru aside and coming in this direction.

The expression on his face shocked me. The cold smile was gone and replaced with a look of agony that twisted his features. The next second, he became aware of my presence. All emotions drained from his face as he hurried past, pretending not to see me.

Satoru was still frozen to the spot. I wanted to call out to him, but decided not to.

Why? Questions whirled around in my head. Why did Shun have to act so cruelly? He was always the kindest and most considerate one in our group. And from what I had accidentally seen, he still was. He was obviously suffering.

But when I saw Shun at school the next day, he didn't look particularly disturbed. On the other hand, Satoru was visibly hurt. Anyone could tell just by looking that he had been dumped. But once in a while, he still snuck hopeful glances at Shun. It was painful to watch.

A few days later, another bad omen appeared.

At that time, all our practical courses at Sage Academy were based on each student's aptitude. Although the general technique for using cantus was the same, there were hundreds of levels of difficulty, from simple force exchange to something as advanced as cold fusion. Most of the class was somewhere in the middle, though there were some students who were able to tackle much harder techniques.

Shun's progress was far ahead of the group. He was working on hatching a chick from its egg in under two hours, an incredibly difficult task since it normally takes an egg twenty-one days to hatch. In other words, he had to use his cantus to speed up the development of something he couldn't even see by a factor of 250.

To be given permission to use cantus directly on a living being requires not only technical skill, but also recognition of outstanding character. In other words, there were incredibly high expectations for Shun in the future.

Unexpectedly, Satoru was also part of the advanced group. His talent was in reflecting and manipulating light, and his task to create a mirror out of thin air was one of the most difficult skills behind Shun's. I've mentioned this before, but creating a lens out of a vacuum to magnify a distant image was something on the level of Shisei Kaburagi. Satoru's technique of using water vapor in the air to create a wall to reflect light was considerably easier than that though.

On the other hand, the skill I was working on was reasonably difficult, but much more boring. I had to fuse together a broken glass vase. Maria was working on full-body levitation, making her the center of everyone's attention. Mamoru was…actually I can't really remember what he was doing.

"Saki, check it out."

I looked up and saw an amorphous silver mirror floating a meter in front of me, reflecting my expression of intense concentration.

"Isn't it kind of distorted?" I said shortly.

Satoru, who had been expecting me to praise him, gave me a sulky look. "No way, it's perfectly flat."

"My face isn't that sunken in."

"What? Isn't it your heart that's distorted here?"

With that snide remark, Satoru retreated. The mirror melted into thin air. After that, every time I wanted to talk to Satoru, I noticed him sneaking closer to Shun, watching him from behind.

I thought Satoru was still blindly in love with Shun, but it seemed that he at least understood that there was no chance of them repairing their relationship. He shook his head sadly and walked toward Rei, a short boy from team five, who smiled flirtatiously at him. Rei had liked Satoru for a

while, but never made a move because of Shun. Satoru created another mirror and Rei, the class narcissist, began admiring his own reflection and making cute faces like a girl.

During all this, Shun concentrated on his project, ignoring his chattering classmates. In front of him was a simple egg stand with a single chicken egg on it. Everyone knew about the difficulty of his assignment and gave him a wide berth.

Someone came in from the back entrance of the classroom. When I glanced over casually (let me say first that I'm not actually that easily distracted), I was shocked. It was Shisei Kaburagi. His eyes were covered with goggle-like sunglasses, but his thin nose and chin plus his smooth skin gave the impression of a very young man.

The Sun Prince, who was supervising our practice, approached him confusedly. They talked too quietly for me to hear, but it seemed that Shisei Kaburagi was here to observe the students.

The two of them started walking around the classroom. Suddenly, the entire class became extremely nervous. If everyone had been concentrating this much from the beginning, they probably would have finished their assignments already.

Shisei Kaburagi came closer to us. I thought maybe he would show interest in what I was working on and started trying to fuse my vase in earnest. I fit the broken pieces together and imagined the cracks disappearing like ice refreezing.

I peeked at him to observe his reaction, and saw him walking right past me.

That was disappointing. I knew this assignment was too boring to catch anyone's interest.

Shisei Kaburagi stopped in front of Maria and gazed up at her for a good amount of time. There wasn't anything particularly interesting about her technique, so maybe he was just admiring her beauty and youthful body. Although he looked young, he was around our parent's age. No matter how powerful he was, I couldn't help feeling a little disgusted by the way he looked at her.

He also spent a long time evaluating Satoru's mirror and giving him advice. Satoru looked completely blown away by the attention and turned bright red.

Finally, Shisei Kaburagi slowly approached Shun, who was still staring fixedly at the chicken egg.

Everyone was waiting for an historic encounter. Shun was the one expected to inherit Shisei Kaburagi's mantle in the future. This could be the first time he receives advice from him.

But Shisei Kaburagi's steps suddenly halted.

What was wrong? He took one, two steps backwards, then turned on his heel and quickly left the classroom as everyone watched in a daze.

Shun looked up at his retreating figure. The expression on his face scared me.

I still don't know exactly what I saw. Something like a cold smile, but much more dreadful, without hope of salvation. Almost like the insane smile of someone who had been cast into a pit of endless despair.

The Sun Prince, who had chased frantically after Shisei Kaburagi, returned.

"Umm…due to unforeseen circumstances, we'll end today's practice here. Please put away your materials and return to your classrooms."

He was smiling as usual, but his voice was hoarse and there was a sheen of sweat on his nose.

"Saki," Satoru caught up with me.

"Hey, what in the world happened?"

He didn't answer, but jerked his head toward Shun, who was still sitting in front of the egg.

"Satoru, let's go," Rei hugged Satoru's arm and tried to lead him away.

"Go on ahead. I'll catch up," he said gently, giving Rei a pat on the butt and pushing him toward the exit.

"Hurry and clean up, you guys," the Sun Prince clapped his hands at us.

I put the broken vase back in its box.

"Shun, aren't you coming?" Maria asked.

Mamoru stood closely behind her. Everyone else had left, leaving only the Sun Prince and the five members of team one.

"Yeah," Shun stood. He looked pale, and there was still a trace of that twisted smile on his face.

"That," Maria pointed at the egg stand.

As he reached out to pick it up, Shun suddenly lost his footing. His hands jerked and the egg fell from its stand.

Everyone expected him to stop the egg before it hit the ground. After so much practice, all of us were able to mentally compress and chant our mantra in a split second. Of course Shun would be able to make it in time.

But the egg fell to the floor, and broke.

What happened? Was he sick? We all stared at him. I was the only one who paid any attention to the broken egg.

No, there might have been another person who noticed.

"Now now, hurry along, you guys. I'll clean up the rest," the Sun Prince forced his way between us with alarming speed, pushing Shun and Maria by the shoulders. The next second, we found ourselves herded out of the practice room.

"Shun, are you okay?" Satoru asked worriedly, apparently forgetting that he had been dumped.

"Yeah," he replied, not meeting Satoru's gaze. "It's nothing…I'm just a bit tired."

"I think we should head home early today," Maria said uncertainly, brows furrowed.

I was more worried about Shun than anyone else, but I didn't say anything. No, I couldn't say anything.

What I had just seen come out of the egg was burned into my retinas.

The thing, covered in a layer of mucus, was not a chick, or anything even remotely similar to a chick. It was a monster.

2

Shun had a pet dog called Subaru, named after "the star Subaru" in Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book,* which referred to the constellation Pleiades. After more research, I found that the name Subaru came from the fact that it was many stars united into one image.*

One winter's night more than two thousand years after *The Pillow Book* was written, a puppy was born. It was a difficult birth, and the mother, along with the rest of the litter, died. The one living puppy born under that starry sky was named Subaru.

However, Subaru didn't live up to the beautiful image his name created. Most dogs in Kamisu 66 were purebred Japanese dogs, with perked ears and curly tails. Bulldogs like Subaru were rare (or nonexistent; the bloodline could have died out altogether for all I know).

Compared to the other dogs, Subaru was ugly. I still don't know why that breed was even created in the first place. He had short legs, a stout body, and a wrinkly face. Right in the middle of his squashed snout was an upturned nose. Surprisingly, all of the books containing information about bulldogs that I found in the ruins of the library were labeled as class three, "possibly dangerous, handle with caution", and forbidden to the general public. Why was information about the establishment of dog breeds treated with such paranoia?

Satoru said that one book he had read stated that bulldogs were created in ancient England to fight bulls. If that was true, then there might be a connection with our own aggressive instincts and it would make sense for those books to be banned.

Although Satoru made up stories often enough for me to suspect what he said, it didn't mean he was incapable of telling the truth. But in this case, I just couldn't believe his words for a number of reasons. First, I couldn't figure out why dogs needed to fight bulls. Although the book Satoru read said it was for sport, I didn't believe that humans could be that senselessly cruel. Second, I'm not sure exactly how big bulls are, but they must be huge compared to dogs, making it impossible for them to actually fight. Third, the only bulldog I know of, Subaru, was extremely gentle. To have the descendant of a breed of fighting dog be this docile is something I couldn't imagine. And, to the

* Pleiades is usually written only in hiragana as すばる (subaru), but Saki says that it comes from the kanji 統ばる (subaru), meaning 'many united into one'

best of my knowledge, Subaru has only ever acted violently once in his entire life. But that's a story for a later time.

Shun was an only child, and he took care of Subaru as a surrogate mother. Since Subaru couldn't walk very quickly and got tired easily, Shun couldn't bring him everywhere he went, but once in a while I would see them taking a walk together. It was a funny contrast seeing Shun striding with his long, slender legs and Subaru trotting on his stout little legs to keep up.

That's why I was surprised when I saw him walking alone on the hill overlooking the town one day. It was autumn, and the setting sun filled the air with melancholy. It was about two weeks after the incident in the practice room.

"Shun," I called, as he walked toward me with his head down, deep in thought.

"Saki," he said, sounding as if he were waking from a dream.

The hazy evening light made it impossible to read his expression.

"What's wrong?" I took a step toward him.

"Stay back!" he said sharply.

I halted. We were twenty meters apart.

"Why?" my voice rang with sadness.

"…sorry. But I want to be alone."

"Alone?"

"Yeah." He looked straight at me, then averted his gaze.

"Is that why you broke up with Satoru?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"But why? You want to be alone so much that you'd abandon all your friends?"

"That's…even if I explain, you won't understand." Shun took something out of his pocket.

Metal orbs glittered in the setting sun. Wasp balls. You use your cantus to levitate them and spin them around at high speed to produce a buzzing sound. It was one of the first toys we used at Sage Academy to develop our powers. No one in our class bothered with them anymore, so it was strange to see someone as skilled as Shun using them.

"I don't think we'll be able to meet for a while."

The three balls orbited Shun's head, catching the light of the sun and buzzing discordantly.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't go to school for the time being. I have to get treatment."

"Are you sick?" I was extremely worried. Was he contagious? Was that why he couldn't come near us?

"Hm. Sick…it's not like a cold or a stomach flu. How should I say this? It's not my body that's sick. It's my mind."

At the time, I didn't understand what sickness of the mind meant. Was he infected, was it some bacteria, or a virus?

"Well, I have to go."

"Wait," I called out as he turned away. "Even if we can't meet at school, I can still visit you sometimes, right?"

"I don't know about that," he seemed to be hesitating, "I won't be living at home anymore."

I gasped, "Where are you going then?"

"To a small bungalow for rehabilitation, or that's what they call it, but it's really just a small house. I'm moving there in a few days to start living by myself."

"Where is it?"

"I can't tell you that."

I was speechless. Until then, the idea of keeping secrets from each other was an impossibility to me. If he really couldn't tell me, then the truth must be worse than I could imagine.

"Shun." My mind was completely blank. I didn't know what to say. "Are…are you really going to be totally alone? What about Subaru?" I asked, mentally prepared for the worst.

"He's at home," he said simply. "I wanted to take a walk so I snuck out by myself."

I was slightly relieved that Subaru was okay, but I was still getting more worried by the second. What in the world had happened to Shun?

"Is there any way I can help you?"

He didn't answer. The only sound was the buzzing of the wasp balls.

"Shun, I've always lo-"

I was so close to confessing my feelings for him, but he interrupted.

"Saki, I don't know if I should tell you this but I think it's for the best."

"Huh?"

"Remember the summer camp two years ago? We thought we managed to hide the fact that Rijin sealed our cantus. But we didn't."

"What?" I didn't understand what he was trying to say.

"They probably knew everything. I don't know why, but I think they simply decided to delay punishing us."

"I don't know where you're going with this."

"They've been watching this whole time. I just recently noticed."

My body felt heavy, like a sinking ship. Cold sweat rolled down my body.

"There's probably no need to warn you by now, but, Saki, watch out for the cats."

"Cats? What cats? You mean copycats?"

Shun moved his head ambiguously, neither a nod nor a shake. "Oh yeah…here, take this." He took off the choker he was wearing and threw it to me.

It was a lot heavier than I expected. The thick leather band was inlaid with metal rings that opened up on hinges. It looked like a neck cuff for prisoners.

"What is this?"

"A charm against cats. I made it."

"Subaru has one too, doesn't he?"

Actually it looked nothing like Subaru's collar. He smiled briefly at my joke, but didn't laugh.

He started to walk away, but stopped all of a sudden.

Some small white animal was coming toward us. Subaru. Running as fast as his little legs could carry him.

"Silly dog…I told you not to follow me," he said quietly to himself.

Then he turned away from me, away from Subaru, and walked quickly down the hill.

The little bulldog ran after him, wagging his tail. He wasn't very good at running to begin with, but his steps looked even more unsteady now.

Then I noticed that Subaru's right hind leg seemed to be injured. No, that wasn't right. There was something weird about it.

But before I had a chance to take a closer look, he had disappeared into the deepening twilight.

"In other words, we have to find out where Shun went," Satoru said quietly.

"But how?" I asked uncertainly, though Satoru's words did cheer me up a little.

"How? With every possible method," he said, completely unfazed.

"Are you still trying to get back with him?" Maria said, giving him a cynical look. "Now that we know he didn't break up with you because he hates you."

"That's not my intent," Satoru answered levelly. "Anyway, don't we all have a lot of questions to ask him? Are we really under surveillance? What did he mean by watching out for cats? And…" Satoru's hand clenched into fists, "what in the world is going on with Shun?"

I felt my heart twist painfully. I hadn't told anyone about what I had seen in the broken chicken egg. I knew instinctively it had a direct connection to whatever problems Shun was facing right now, but if I said it out loud, then my fears would become reality, so I couldn't say anything no matter what.

Shun hadn't gone to school in four days. We gathered behind the school building after classes were out and were having a huddled discussion.

"…but if they're really watching us, wouldn't it be better not to do anything that stands out?" Mamoru said carefully.

"Yeah, he's right. I think it's too dangerous," Maria took Mamoru's side.

"So you're just going to abandon Shun?" Satoru asked angrily.

"I didn't say that. But…" she looked around nervously. "Even now I feel like I'm being watched."

"There's no one around. Stop being stupid," he sneered.

I suddenly thought of something. "Hey, remember when we were running from Kiroumaru? There was this creepy bird following us around all night."

"You too, Saki? Those were nightjars and crows trained by the queerats."

"If the queerats could do that, then the Ethics Committee would have even more clever tricks, right?"

"Yeah! I've heard stories too. Geniuses like Shisei Kaburagi, Koufuu Hino, and Yuu Tatebe can control genes and create animals from their imagination. I wouldn't be surprised if that weird bee over there were watching us right now."

Everyone fell silent. The oppressive mood weighed heavily on us. If they did use surveillance bugs, and we didn't notice, then we were done for. Plus, where the bug sends its report after it returns to its hideout was a whole other issue.

"…okay. I'm going to look for Shun anyway. You don't have to help if you don't want to."

"I'll help." I said immediately.

"Wait! You're making it sound like we're not worried about Shun at all. Don't," Maria protested. "I'm just saying it's too obvious if all four of us start snooping around. Right, Mamoru?"

Mamoru opened his mouth. It looked as if this wasn't what he meant at all, but in the end, he nodded without saying anything.

"You're right. Let's split up and look then."

We divided ourselves into two groups. Maria and Mamoru went to talk to Shun's friends from other teams. Satoru and I went directly to his house.

Luckily, there was already a public canoe available when we arrived at the dock. We set off down the web of interconnected canals.

The town of Pinewind is situated in the northernmost region of Kamisu 66, and Shun's house was on the northern outskirts of town. It was a huge gabled building supported by a thick pillar a meter in diameter, over which a thirty-meter long beam held up the ceiling. I used to play there a lot as a child, and it always gave off a somewhat scary aura I didn't expect from wooden houses. Once we got older though, we started playing outside and stopped visiting each other's homes.

The canoe sped nimbly through the waterways, but Satoru suddenly slowed down way before we were even close to the junction leading to Pinewind.

"What's wrong?"

"Look at that."

I followed his gaze and saw numerous boats moored near the junction. They were all much bigger than the canoe we were in. An image of "god's eye", the town's seal, along with a red number were drawn on the side of each boat. These were boats used by town officials, and the different Sanskrit words painted on the side showed which division they belonged to. These had the word Hrih, symbolizing Amitabha or the Thousand-Armed goddess, so they were probably from the Department of Health or Environmental Protection.

"Just go past them."

Our canoe headed straight on the waterway. I glanced at the junction out of the corner of my eye and saw, twenty meters above the water, a black and yellow striped rope. A clear sign that entrance was forbidden.

"What's going on? Does this mean we can't enter Pinewind?"

"It looks like it."

"But…it can't be."

Did it have something to do with Shun? I wanted to ask, but was too scared to open my mouth.

"Guess we'll just have to walk in."

"Don't you think there'll be guards on the road?"

"Let's go around, through the forest."

We disembarked at a dock about a kilometer away and started walking in the opposite direction. On our left was a grassy field and on our right a forest of ferns, camellia, and evergreen trees. We made sure we weren't being watched, then slipped into the forest.

"I have a bad feeling about this."

"Yeah, me too."

The feeling grew stronger with every step. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, as if there were a magnetic field ahead pushing all the particles in our body away from it.

How far had we gone? After a while, the black and yellow stripes came into view. The rope had been extended all the way into the middle of the forest.

"You're kidding. Who even comes through here?"

"I guess this thing goes around the entire town."

Satoru folded his arms and stared at the rope. It was tied around the trees in a zigzagging pattern, but didn't look as if it curved around anywhere.

"Well, we'll just have to go through here then," Satoru ducked under the rope that was stretched out at eye-level.

I followed right behind. My heart was pounding and I knew we seriously breaking the rules but there was no other choice.

"Sh," Satoru suddenly stopped and gestured for me to be quiet.

I froze.

There was movement in between the trees some thirty meters ahead.

Satoru turned around and mouthed something to me. Qu-ee-rat… It appeared to be a sentry.

We crouched in the shadow of the trees, trying not to breathe. I created a gentle breeze with my cantus to blow our scent away.

It felt like an eternity, but in reality probably only ten minutes passed. A sharp call echoed through the woods. The queerat sprang to attention and rushed off.

"Alright, let's go."

We started forward again. Finally, we came across a dirt road cutting through the evergreen forest. On the other side was a large red pine forest for which the town is named after.

After double-checking to make sure that there were no people or queerats around, we darted across the road into the pine forest.

Suddenly, all the little hairs on my body stood up.

Panicking, I looked around wildly. I only saw trees and grass. Nothing out of the ordinary. But something felt completely wrong.

"Just as I thought, there's something weird going on. Something bad in the air. We shouldn't stay here for too long," Satoru said, apparently getting the same vibes as me.

"What do we do?"

"We've already come this far, we can't turn back now, right?" Satoru whispered, though he looked uncertain.

We went another forty or fifty meters into the pine forest. An unbelievable sight appeared before us. There was another rope stretched out at eye-level. But it wasn't a simple black and yellow striped one.

"The Holy Barrier! Why?"

It was a pure white rope hung with lots of streamers. Why was the Holy Barrier, which was supposed to protect Kamisu 66 from the outside world, here in Pinewind?

"Did the town's borders shrink?"

"No, that's not it," Satoru said, inspecting the rope. "This is obviously newly made. The old Holy Barrier is probably still where it always has been."

"Then what is this?"

"Another barrier inside the town that goes all the way around Pinewind."

It didn't make sense no matter how I looked at it. The Holy Barrier was supposed keep bad things out, but now it seemed like it was holding something in.

Satoru sighed deeply, "Anyway, if we want to keep going, we'll have to cross the barrier."

I nodded. Going beyond the Holy Barrier was completely different from crossing a simple "entrance prohibited" rope. If we were found out, nothing we could say would help us.

But I already knew that this was the only way to find Shun.

We ducked under the rope, careful not to touch any of the streamers.

At first it seemed that nothing had changed. But as we kept going, abnormalities began to appear.

The usually lush undergrowth in the forest looked as if it had been mown down by a hurricane. Everything was twisted and dying.

I couldn't read Satoru's expression. We continued in silence.

The sky was only slightly overcast, and the sun was still high in the sky, but our surroundings grew darker and darker. The trees were blocking out the light, their thick branches seemingly fusing together to form a roof above us. In comparison to the undergrowth, the trees seemed to have grown much more than was normal.

Satoru broke off a branch and lit it with his cantus. Even though it was still broad daylight, we couldn't see where we were putting our feet without a torch.

After a while, we saw a sliver of light between the trees. We tried to get closer, but were stopped by the roots of the trees. They rose out of the ground like giant snakes, coiling this way and that, over and around, making it impossible to walk through. It looked like an alien world. I was just about to suggest that we cut through with our cantus, but realized that it would leave obvious proof that we had been here. I reluctantly started picking my way through the gaps in the trees.

"Saki," Satoru turned around, holding the torch aloft. "Look."

He was pointing at the tree trunks. Their bark didn't have the usual tortoiseshell pattern like normal red pines. Instead they were covered in lumps that looked like tumors or cancer cells.

Then, I saw that some of them resembled human faces.

Faces twisted in unimaginable pain, screaming faces, faces of the dead.

I shivered and looked away.

"Let's hurry."

I was almost prepared to face even more horrible sights ahead. Instead I was amazed by what I saw.

There was a slope that had been more or less cleared by falling boulders. The trees were sparse and the ground was full of mountain azaleas. What was weird was that even though it was already autumn, they were all in full bloom, covering the slope with red and pink flowers and filling the air with the most fragrant aroma I had ever smelled.

"How pretty…" I said, breathing in their perfume and going for a closer look.

"Stop. Don't touch them," Satoru caught me by the arm. "There's something wrong with these flowers. Look," he pointed down at his feet.

The ground was littered with the corpses of innumerable ants, bees, beetles, spiders, and other insects.

"Don't you think this smell is way too strong? There's probably some toxic substance in it."

"In the azaleas?"

"They're not normal flowers, no matter how you look at it."

His words seem to break the spell. I looked at the flowers I had thought so beautiful until now, and shuddered at their deceptive poison.

No, that wasn't the only reason I had shuddered.

"Where is this chill coming from?"

There was a cold wind blowing from the depths of the forest.

"…let's take a look," Satoru said, looking as if he were preparing himself for the worst.

As if possessed, we made our way toward the source of the wind.

"Snow!" he shouted.

"It can't be. It's still autumn. It's not snowing anywhere." I couldn't believe my eyes.

Satoru touched the white powder that covered the roots of the trees. "No…wait. It's not snow."

"Then what is it?" I didn't have the courage to touch it.

"Frost. There's a lot of it so it looks like snow. I don't know why, but the ground is much colder than it should be so the water in the air froze."

The only place where frost never melted was in the permafrost layer deep underground.

It's all messed up, I whispered to myself. Everything here had deviated from the normal rules of nature.

We took a detour around the frosted area. A hundred meters later, the forest ended abruptly.

"Careful," Satoru said quietly.

We lay on the ground and crawled toward the forest's edge.

It was a dizzying sight. Beneath us was a bowl shaped hole in the ground two hundred meters in diameter and a hundred fifty meters deep. It looked like a giant ant lion pit.

"Unbelievable. Did a meteor do this?"

"Sh," Satoru put a finger to his lips. "There are people over there."

There were human silhouettes at the bottom of the hole.

"…it wasn't a meteor. One that's big enough to make a hole this size would cause a huge explosion. We never heard anything," he whispered in response to my earlier question.

"Then what is this hole?"

"Stop asking me about everything."

"What? You don't know the answer?"

Satoru looked offended. "I can only hypothesize. The hole was probably made by those people down there."

"What for?"

"Sh," Satoru shushed me again.

The two people were slowly floating upward. I was afraid they were going to come toward us, but they landed on the other side of the hole and started walking away. When they were out of sight, Satoru began talking at a normal volume.

"…they were definitely trying to excavate something."

I stared down into the bottom of the crater. There was something down there, but it was hidden in the shadow cast by the hole. If I were on the other side, I would probably be able to see it. Suddenly I had an idea.

"Satoru, make a mirror over there," I pointed.

He immediately realized what I had in mind. The air shimmered and blinding rays of light flashed in all directions. They gradually converged and a silver mirror appeared.

"Point it down more."

"I know already! Yeesh."

He slowly angled it downward. Soon we were able to see what was at the bottom of the hole.

We were stunned into silence. Hadn't I come here time and again? Why did I not realize where we were until now?

The mirror reflected a large building almost completely buried in the dirt. Just one glimpse of the dark wood and I knew it was Shun's house.

We didn't talk much on the way back.

Even though we had come across many strange things in the pine forest, most of our thoughts were focused on Shun.

I didn't know what had happened, but it looked like the Earth had tried to swallow Shun's house whole. It seemed impossible to survive something like that. So why was I convinced that Shun was still alive?

Where was he now? Was he okay? Did he need help? All these unanswerable questions whirled around in my head.

"You said he left home, right? So he's gotta be okay," Satoru said, more to himself than to me. "Let's go look for him tomorrow morning. I'm sure we'll find him."

"Shouldn't we go right now?"

"The sun's going to set soon. We don't have a clue where Shun is right now. I know you're worried, but we'll have a fresh start tomorrow."

How could he be so calm? Wasn't he worried? Unlike Satoru, I wasn't confident at all.

We arrived at the park where we were supposed to meet up with Maria and Mamoru, but there was no sign of them. We waited for a bit, but decided to go home.

"See you tomorrow, then."

The words were unsuited for the situation. It sounded like we were parting after a picnic in the park. We went our separate ways; Satoru headed toward Hayring and I took my canoe back to Waterwheel.

Shadows stretched across the town as the sun went down over Mt. Tsukuba. Braziers were lit all over town, making the waterways sparkle with orange reflections. This was always my favorite

time of the day, when I could enjoy the scenery as I reflected on the day's events and looked forward to what the next day had to offer.

I tied up the canoe behind our house and went in through the back door. I was surprised to see that both my parents were home early.

"Welcome home," mother smiled. "Dinner is ready. It's been a while since we've eaten together."

Father stared at me as I sat down at the table, then grinned broadly.

"Look at you. You're all covered in dirt. Go wash up."

When I came back, I expected my father to ask where I had been, but he didn't. He was talking about the plans to install street lamps in the center of the town, as it seemed that using only braziers was not enough. But incandescent bulbs would require electricity, which was only allowed to be used to power the loudspeakers in the public hall. So in order to move forward with the plan, they first needed to revise the Code of Ethics.

"No matter how many times we petition, the higher-ups at the Ethics Committee never agree to it," my father, the mayor, grumbled as he poked at a piece of fish with his chopsticks.

"It would be nice if you could do something about the lights in the library first," mother said. Her job as head librarian put her in a position even higher than the mayor's.

"The library already uses a fifth of our annual budget."

"I know. But we've had to work late recently, and the phosphorescent lamps are too much of a hassle," she pointed at the light above the dining table.

At that time phosphorescent lamps were widely used for lighting. Often called bontan balls, phosphorescent lamps are large circular vacuum tubes whose insides are coated with a special paint containing platinum or iridium. After you charge it up with your cantus the lamp would shine for a specific amount of time. However, it only lasts for about half an hour before the light starts dimming and you have to charge it up again, so that was annoying.

"Right now only Waterwheel has electricity to spare. But it's impossible to lay down cables all the way to the library in Hayring."

"Can't you just build a new waterwheel next to the library?"

"That would be difficult. It would obstruct traffic, and the canals there flow too slowly to produce electricity."

The more they continued their spirited discussion, the more I felt that something wasn't right. It was as if they were purposely putting on this show to prevent the conversation from moving in an unwanted direction.

"…hey, do you know what happened to Shun?"

The two of them fell silent instantly.

I felt my pulse speed up. I knew full well this was a dangerous question, so why did I say it out loud? Was I angry at my parents for carrying on such a useless conversation at a time when we were so worried about Shun? Or was I gambling on the chance that I might discover some sort of clue?

"You mean Shun Aonuma?" father asked quietly.

"Yeah. He suddenly stopped coming to Sage Academy." My voice cracked a little.

"It's forbidden to talk about these things. You know that too, don't you?" mother smiled chidingly.

"Yeah…but," I looked downward, on the verge of tears.

"Saki…Sacchan," father weakened as he saw my tears.

Sacchan was a nickname he hadn't used since I was four or five.

"Dear," mother said worriedly.

"It's okay. Saki, listen. You will have to face many hardships in life. One of them is parting with your dear friends."

"What happened to Shun?" I shouted, interrupting him.

Father frowned, "He's missing."

"Why?"

"A few days ago, there was a big accident in Pinewind. Shun Aonuma and his parents have been missing ever since."

"An accident? What was it? No one told me anything about it. Why has…"

"Saki! Enough," mother said severely.

"But-"

"We're worried about you. Okay? Don't talk back, and listen to us. You have to stop prying into things that don't concern you."

I nodded reluctantly and stood up.

"Saki, please," my mother said tearfully as I was about to leave the dining room. "I can't lose another… No, I don't want to lose you. Please do as we say."

"All right. I'm tired, I'm going to bed."

"Goodnight, Saki," father said. He put his arms around mother, who was pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Goodnight."

As I climbed the stairs, all I heard were my mother's words. "I can't lose another… No, I don't want to lose you." And something else I had heard long ago. A pained voice shouting, "I don't want to lose another child!"

I lay in bed with a million thoughts running through my head, unable to fall asleep.

I've always wondered whether I had an older sister. The first time the thought crossed my mind was when I was around ten years old. My mother had accidentally left me unsupervised at the library, and I came upon an old dictionary (class three material). In Harmony School, we had talked about how our names reflected our parents' wishes and expectations, so I wanted to know what my name meant.

"Sa" had three definitions, 'dawn', 'early', and 'young', but I didn't know which one mine was. Since I was still a kid I thought it was obvious that I was 'young'. Next I looked up "ki". 'Very young', 'time', 'little'… Just when I thought that the two words meant exactly the same thing, I noticed the last definition.

'Youngest child'.

Of course, this wasn't definitive proof that I was the "youngest child". But my mother was more sensitive to the meaning of words than anyone else. I got the feeling that if I were the oldest child, I wouldn't have had "ki" in my name.

As I thought about this, dim memories from my childhood began to resurface. I think I was two or three at that time. There was a person who always took care of me wherever I went. That person was older than me, but much younger than my mother. My parents called me Sacchan and that person Yocchan.

That's right. My sister's name was Yoshimi.

There was no evidence that this wasn't just a false memory created by autosuggestion, but after hearing my mother cry that she didn't want to lose *another* child, the idea that I once had a sister was becoming more and more convincing.

If this was the truth, then why was my sister no longer here? Had she really been eliminated? And did it have some connection with what was going on with Shun?

I couldn't come up with any conclusions. I was trapped in a cycle of convoluted thoughts.

Then I heard something hit the window.

My head jerked up. Moonlight shone in through the open curtains and I saw someone floating outside of the second-floor window.

For a second I thought I was having a paranormal experience and felt my legs go weak with fear. Then the light fell on a head of red hair and I realized it was Maria.

"What's wrong?" I opened the window.

"Sorry. I dropped by the park but there was no one there. I got a good scolding when I got home earlier."

It would be bad if my parents saw her.

"Hurry, come in," I gestured at Maria. "Why did it take so long? You were only going around to interview people, right?"

Maria clung tightly to me.

"Maria?"

"I was so scared! We were so close to being killed too!"

"What do you mean? Explain properly."

Maria was trembling, but managed to collect herself. She sat down next to me on the bed and started talking.

At first, they had wandered around randomly looking for Shun's friends. Fortunately, Mamoru seemed to have unusual luck in finding things and they managed to run into and question two or three people this way. But they didn't discover any clues.

They realized something strange. Outside of team one, most of Shun's friends were from Pinewind, but over half of them were absent from Sage Academy. And the one person they did manage to find refused to say anything at all.

They were about to head to Pinewind when they realized that Satoru and I were already on our way there, so they went back to Sage Academy.

But as usual, there were almost no students that stayed behind after school was over. The two of them were about to go home when they remembered something that Shun and Satoru had been

talking about in the past. That story about how there were weird structures in the courtyard that smelled like ammonia and you could hear animals growling inside them.

"…so we decided to check the courtyard. Of course we didn't believe that Shun was there, but we thought we might be able to find some clues."

Somehow, Maria and Mamoru managed to get in on nothing but luck.

"But how did you get into the courtyard? Shun and Satoru had to memorize the position of the locks."

"Did you forget? I can levitate. I went over the wall when no one was looking. Of course, Mamoru can't, so I had to open the door from the inside for him. Anyway, Shun was right. There were about a dozen little bolts arranged radially…"

Who cared about the locks.

"Forget that. What happened?" I said impatiently.

"Same as when Shun and Satoru were there, nothing. Apart from the five little brick rooms in the back."

I remembered what Shun had said back in Harmony School.

"There are wooden doors on the buildings, but they look super sturdy. Probably made of oak, four or five centimeters thick, and there are cast iron bars over it, with these hinges…"

"I don't really care about the doors. Get to the point and tell me what you saw!" I shouted in irritation.

Maria had great concentration and observational skills, but sucked at summarizing what she saw.

"Sorry. Anyway, we wanted to find out what was inside, but couldn't open the doors without destroying them."

"I'm sorry too. I just really wanted to know what you guys found."

"Yeah, so we put our ears against the door. We heard something."

"What did it sound like?"

"A low growl. And then footsteps like some big animal walking back and forth. I could tell that whatever it was had noticed us too."

"Wait a second. Is there that much room in that shed?"

"Uh-uh. I think the building is just an entrance that connects to a basement or a cell underground. The presence of that thing seemed to come from below."

"Hm. But in the end you still don't know what was making that noise?"

"Don't jump to conclusions. We did see it afterwards. Though not its entire body."

I resisted the urge to snap at her to hurry up and listened quietly.

"Mamoru and I were about to peek into the building when I heard the bolts on the door turning. Someone was coming into the courtyard. There was nowhere to hide so we jumped behind the buildings. Just in time too. The door opened the next second and they came in."

"Who?"

"I couldn't see their faces, but I could tell from their voices that there were three of them. One was probably the Sun Prince. The other two were a man and a woman, and the woman sounded like the one that interviewed us after we came back from summer camp."

I swallowed. "What did they talk about?"

"I could only hear bits of the conversation, but the man was saying that they needed to hurry and settle this before he was completely demonized. And if they failed, it would be a disaster, and stuff like that. I don't know what he meant by demonize though."

Part of me had been prepared for this. Still, it felt like I had been hit over the head with a metal bat. Demonize probably meant turning into a karma demon.

"…and after that?" I forced myself to speak.

"The woman said to send out the tainted cats immediately. And the Sun Prince asked if she meant the black and striped ones that they've been using." Maria's voice shook. "Then they opened them. The second and fourth rooms. And these big animals came out. I only caught a glimpse of them, but they looked as big as the lions in the old zoos and a lot skinnier."

"The animals…the tainted cats, didn't they sense you hiding there?"

"Yeah. But someone immediately restrained the cats with their cantus and transported them elsewhere, so we weren't discovered. …but, this the most important thing! The Sun Prince let slip where the cats were being sent. He said it's a pity for such a talented child."

I already knew who it was.

"I heard it with my own ears! Shun Aonuma."

3

After that, I don't really remember how I calmed Maria down. In any case, I had to say something to make her feel that Shun wasn't in grave danger. I'm not as good at lying as Satoru is, but I can do a good enough job if I have to, so I promised Maria that we would go look for Shun the next morning and somehow convinced her to go home.

I knew I would feel much braver if the two of us were together, but I couldn't put my friend's life in danger.

After she left, I dressed hurriedly. I put a windbreaker on over my sweater, and clipped my hair up with a barrette. Since I did a lot of outdoor activities, I already had a pack prepared with things like medicine, a compass, and other emergency supplies. I stuffed it into by backpack, and at the last minute remembered to bring the charm Shun had given me.

I snuck quietly out of the window and onto the roof. Unlike Maria, I didn't know how to levitate yet, so I muttered my mantra and jumped as hard as I could. The instant my cantus kicked in, the rush of air that hit me was as heavy as water. It was like falling in a dream. I lost my balance and landed badly on my foot, but luckily didn't hurt myself.

There was no time to waste. I got up and made my way swiftly to the back of the house, untied the canoe from the dock and set off down the dark canal as quietly as possible. When I was a good distance away, I set the canoe going at full speed.

I wasn't sure if I would make it in time. It was dark, and I was going so fast that if I made the slightest mistake, I would crash and sink.

Still, I didn't hesitate. I would save Shun no matter what. I have to make it in time. The whole of my being was concentrated on it.

As I sped along the dark waterway, I was enveloped in a strange sense of deja vu.

It was the first day of summer camp, when Shun and I were night canoeing. Shun had stilled the surface of the river and turned it into a mirror reflecting the starry sky above.

Shun had propelled Hakuren 4 on the waves through the infinite fragments of shining stars.

The flow of the water and the banks of the river on either side were a blur in the darkness. I couldn't tell how fast we were going. Just like how I felt now.

The boat I was using now was also called Hakuren 4. We technically weren't allowed to register boats with identical names, but I couldn't think of anything else to call it.

I arrived at the junction leading to Pinewind in no time. I stopped. Earlier this afternoon, there had been quite a few boats docked here, but now that it was the dead of night, only one remained. There was a lit brazier on the boat, but no sign of anyone.

This time around, I didn't have the time to take a detour through the forest. I had to go through the junction. I started forward slowly. I concentrated as hard as I could on muffling the sound of the waves. Hakuren 4 glided forward into the circle of light and under the rope blocking the way.

If someone came out from the boat now, that would be the end. I held my breath until I thought Hakuren 4 had gone far enough to be hidden in the darkness.

The watchman on the boat probably thought that no one would dare break the rules and enter Pinewind. Otherwise, it would never have been this easy to sneak in.

I continued onward quietly and soon passed under the second Holy Barrier. There was no patrol here.

The moonlight illuminated two large pines in front of me. This should be the center of town. Peering through the darkness, I could see the silhouettes of houses along the river, but none had lights in the windows. Pinewind had turned into no-man's land.

I turned and followed a narrow canal north.

I didn't know exactly where Shun lived now, but had a general idea. His home was already on the northern outskirts of Pinewind. If he was going to move to a small bungalow even more isolated from people, there was a good chance that it would be way in the north, near the Holy Barrier. I could keep going in that direction by following the compass, but the question was, how far would I have to go?

The narrow canal ended five hundred meters ahead. The dock was already full of boats so I tied up Hakuren 4 to a wooden pile and hopped over the other boats to get ashore. One of them sported a fancy torch that caught my eye. Instead of the usual round log, it was made of strips of bamboo tied together and stuffed with straw, cloth, and magnesium wires for fuel. I lit it with my cantus and it flared to life, illuminating everything around me in dazzling light.

I wasn't familiar with the geography of Pinewind and didn't know where exactly I was now, but turned and headed north.

As I walked, the torch revealed what appeared to be a long-abandoned ghost town. Pinewind had been evacuated not too long ago, yet the streets were filled with trash and bits of wood, and the buildings were rotting away.

But the creepy vibe of the town was interrupted with an even more unsettling feeling.

The light of the torch was so strong that everything outside its circle of illumination was pitch black. I had no idea what I was walking into. On the other hand, anyone could see me coming from miles away.

The logical part of my brain told me that keeping the torch was dangerous, but the primal part said that light meant safety. I tried dimming the flames, but it was too difficult to control. I could either put it out entirely, or let it burn at full force.

I looked at the branches littered at my feet. If I gathered these and lit them as I went along, then I would always have a small source of light. Thinking that I should have done this right at the beginning, I put out the torch.

Everything plunged into darkness. Red and green afterimages flickered in front of my eyes.

I lit one of the branches.

A huge black cat stood in front of me.

Actually, huge doesn't even begin to describe it. As Maria had said, it was at least as big as a lion. Its legs and neck were extremely long, and though its head was comparatively small, about the size of a leopard's, it was tall enough that its glittering eyes were at the same level as mine.

The black cat purred contentedly as it came toward me and put its front paws on my shoulders.

Then in an instant, its huge jaws were around my neck.

I heard its teeth crunch. My mind went blank; I couldn't even remember how to recite my mantra.

So this was a tainted cat… That was the only thought my panicked brain could produce.

I felt its hot breath stirring my hair, and its drool running down my neck. All I could smell was the disgusting stench of ammonia.

Slowly, I became aware that I was still conscious.

The cat was biting down on my neck with tremendous force, but its teeth didn't penetrate my skin. It was the charm Shun had given me. The thick metal rings in the collar had saved me from decapitation.

The moment I realized this, I instinctively whispered my mantra.

I tried to loosen the jaws clamped around my neck. Apparently, once a tainted cat bites down on something, a special joint in their skull causes their jaws to lock, making them extremely difficult to force open. However, it could never compete with the overwhelming power of cantus. The bone creaked and shattered, its lower jaw hung open uselessly and I was freed.

Backing away quickly, I held up the flaming branch and the light fell upon the cat's terrible face. It glared and hissed threateningly like a snake. Its long teeth, like those of a saber-toothed tiger from eons ago, dripped with blood.

I visualized a pair of powerful arms floating before me. One hand held the tainted cat by the neck and the other closed around its body and wrung it like a towel. There was a dry snapping sound. The cat shuddered violently and fell still.

For a while, I sat there breathing heavily. I couldn't stop crying. My neck was hurting, and I discovered that the metal collar had been deformed and wouldn't unhinge. I tore at it with my cantus and finally got it off.

After a moment, I collected myself and stood up to examine the tainted cat's corpse. It looked exactly like the copycats that were always the subject of schoolyard legends. About three meters long, slimmer than tigers or lions, with abnormally long limbs. A face like a normal cat's, except for the fact that the mouth could open many times wider.

I touched the long fangs arcing out of the wide-open mouth. They were over 15 centimeters long, with elliptical cross-sections, and felt rough like sharkskin. It looked like the teeth were usually folded inside the mouth to keep them hidden. Unlike saber-toothed tigers, the tainted cat had fangs

on both the top and bottom jaws that were blunt at the ends. They didn't kill by impaling prey, but by pressing down on their jugular vein and strangling them.

There was only one reason for this method of killing that I could think of. In order to perpetuate the copycat legends, children needed to be taken without leaving behind blood or any other evidence so that there would never be any proof of murder. No matter how I looked at it, the tainted cats were bred for the sole purpose of killing people.

I threw up. As monstrous as the cat was, I still felt instinctively revolted at killing a warm-blooded animal. But more than that, I was disgusted at the existence of this cursed creature.

After an hour, I finally arrived at the giant pit that used to be Shun's home. I had to hurry. I was covered in sweat and the tainted cat's saliva had soaked into my sweater and ran all the way down to my socks. It was cold and extremely nasty, but I didn't have time to stop and wipe myself off.

Having learned my lesson from my near-death experience earlier, I didn't carry a torch. If I became too accustomed to the light, I would be left blind if the torch went out. It would be better to let my eyes adapt to the dark as much as it could and make the best of it.

Although I kept following the compass north, the first sign that confirmed I was going the right way came from a moonlit spider web. The threads were twisted so that they resembled faces and words. Although I didn't know at the time, spider webs are the most sensitive things in nature and are the first to indicate that things are going wrong.

As I got closer to the Holy Barrier, the trees began to show signs of deformation. Most of them leaned in the same direction, as if they had been bent over from an unceasing wind.

For a while now I had been plagued by an uneasy feeling.

Leave. Now. Run as far away from here as possible. That was what my gut was telling me. I didn't want to stay here a second longer.

But I thought about Shun, and tried desperately to encourage myself. I couldn't turn back now. I was the only one who could save him.

I kept going, using the deformed plants as guides. The forest seemed to be twisted in a spiral. If that was the case, then Shun had to be at the center.

The silhouette of the trees resembled giant, tentacled monsters, beckoning toward me. I continued onward, ducking and dodging under the branches.

Before I knew it, I had been enveloped in a thick, milky fog that obscured everything more than a couple centimeters in front of me. I kept hearing whispering noises. The wind, sounds of laughter, and occasionally what seemed to be words, though I couldn't make out what they were.

The information I was getting from my senses was vague and distorted. Even the ground beneath my feet seemed soft and unreliable. The compass needle spun around and around uselessly.

Soon, I couldn't even tell whether it was light or dark anymore. My eyes had stopped working.

What was happening?

My head began to ache as if someone were squeezing it with a clamp. Even thinking was becoming too much of an effort. I stood paralyzed, all feeling draining from my body. I couldn't tell whether I was standing or sitting.

What was this place?

"Shun! Where are you?" I shouted.

My mind cleared for a moment when I heard my own voice, but it soon clouded over again. Just as I felt my consciousness fading away, I heard a voice.

"Saki! What are you doing here?"

"I don't know. I don't even know where…"

The mist suddenly vanished as if it had been sucked away and the ground returned to its familiar solidity.

"Shun!"

A young man stood twenty meters ahead, wearing the purity mask that the shinshi wear during the Demon-Chasing Festival. But the voice was unmistakably Shun's.

"You shouldn't have come. Go home, Saki."

I shook my head.

"Look at this," he pointed at the ground.

At first it was too dark to see, but then the ground began to glow softly and I saw that it was covered with writhing insects.

All of them were deformed. Moths of all sizes unable to fly because of their wilted wings and bulging abdomens. Beetles with the legs on one side of their bodies elongated as if on stilts, stumbling around in endless circles. And centipedes with their front and rear ends fused together so that they were literal rings.

"If you don't want to end up like this, leave now."

"No," I said stubbornly. "Tell me what exactly is going on. I won't move an inch until you do."

"Don't be stupid!" Shun said sharply.

"I'm fine with being stupid. I came all the way here to rescue you. A tainted cat almost killed me along the way," I said in a choked voice.

"You met a cat?"

"Yeah. I was saved thanks to the charm you gave me. But there's probably another cat around."

"I see…" He took a deep breath. "Fine. Ten minutes. You can stay for ten minutes and I'll explain as much as I can. But you have to leave once time is up."

I couldn't stand here and argue with him forever, so I nodded.

Suddenly the area was lit as if by a spotlight. I looked up and saw that the aurora filled the entire sky. A curtain of pale green hung across the sky, blended with ripples of red, pink and purple light.

"How…? Shun, are you doing this?"

I knew that the aurora only appeared at the North and South Poles. Although I didn't understand how it worked with solar wind and plasma and whatever, I could tell that pulling off a stunt like this was something not even Shisei Kaburagi could do.

"…I would have to break our promise if a tainted cat attacked us while we're talking. Let's go to the bungalow," he jerked his head at the building behind him.

I noticed it for the first time. The wavering light from the aurora shone upon a small house, strangely crooked, as if seen through a distorted lens. The beams supporting the building were twisted, and the straw on the roof stuck out in all directions like an angry porcupine.

"Why is the house all weird?"

"Even now, I still keep trying to change it back to normal."

He went in through the oval doorway and I followed.

"Ten minutes…I think I can keep it under control for that long."

Wasp balls that had been strewn all over the floor lifted into the air. I felt like I had walked into a hornet's nest as the balls hummed loudly.

"What is this for? It's so noisy."

"It can't be helped. Bear with them for now."

Shun crossed the dingy room and sat down at a large wooden table. Its warped surface was covered with books and piles of paper.

"Will you sit over there?"

He indicated a chair at the other end of the room. I shook my head and stood in the middle of the bungalow, looking around. Everything was deformed in some way, even things made of what were supposed to be sturdy materials like wood and stone. I felt like my senses were malfunctioning or that the fabric of reality was wearing thin.

"Where should I start? …all problems stem from the human mind."

I frowned, completely lost as to what he was talking about.

"The conscious self is just the tip of the iceberg. The subconscious that exists below the surface is many times greater. That's why we can never fully understand our thoughts and feelings."

"I didn't come for a psychology lecture. I want to know what's happening to you."

"I'm explaining right now," he said in a muffled voice.

"Why are you wearing that mask? Take it off. It gives me the creeps."

"I can't," Shun said curtly. "Besides, there's no time. …listen. No matter what people do, they can never completely control their mind. Even if they think they think they can control their conscious thoughts, they don't know what's going on in their subconscious. Our cantus is the most tangible manifestation of that."

"What do you mean?"

"For physical actions, there are multiple stages between the forming and idea and completing it. Motive comes from our subconscious and must pass through our conscious mind before it can be realized, so logic and reason can change or stop an action from being taken. However, for our cantus, the inception and execution of an action is more or less simultaneous. Even if it's wrong, there's no time to correct it."

"But don't we have to follow prescribed methods and picture very specific things to use cantus?"

"Those images are consciously created, but there are still things hidden in the darkness of our subconscious."

The pitch of the humming wasp balls seemed to rise slightly.

"I don't understand what you're saying. Even if there were images we weren't aware of deep in our minds, we wouldn't be able to make use of them. For one thing, if we don't chant our mantra, our cantus wouldn't work."

"You don't understand. No matter how strictly you try to control it through hypnotic suggestions and mantras, cantus always leaks through the holes in our subconscious."

"Leaks?"

"Yeah. Cantus is constantly leaking out. In a sense, we are always subconsciously changing the world around us."

"That's…" I was speechless.

I thought the idea was ridiculous, but couldn't get the words out.

"Saki, what do you think the Holy Barrier is for? Do you think it can protect us against threats from the outside?"

"I don't know. What do you mean?" I was totally confused.

"The Holy Barrier was created to deal with internal threats, not external ones. And the threat is our leaking cantus. Whether it's karma demons or fiends, all the things we are afraid of come from within."

Shun's voice was calm, but the spinning wasp balls began to quiver.

"Of course, the power that leaks out is feeble and won't wreak havoc overnight. But if we are continually exposed to these thoughts, there's no telling what the result will be. That's why we need to direct it outside."

"How?"

"We've been conditioned to fear the outside world since childhood. The image of that dark boundless world merges with the dark universe that is our subconscious. In our minds, the subconscious becomes directly linked to the outside world, and the cantus that leaks out is directed outside the Holy Barrier. The barrier is a psychological device that helps 'purify' us."

I didn't really understand all the difficult things he was saying.

"…so, what happens to the cantus that is directed outside?"

"It probably takes effect on various things. No one has researched this, so we don't really know."

Shun spread out his hand and the swarm of wasp balls began cruising slowly around the room.

"But I think it does explain some things. For example, the minoshiro. It didn't exist a thousand years ago. In evolutionary terms, a thousand years is equivalent to one night. The ancestor of the minoshiro was probably the sea slug, but how did it manage to evolve so drastically in such a short amount of time?"

"Our cantus created the minoshiro?"

"Not just that. Possibly tiger crabs and haythatchers as well. I've looked up all the new species that have been discovered in the past thousand years. This extraordinary rate of evolution starts, and ends, around the Holy Barrier."

What he was saying was so strange that I immediately rejected it.

"…whatever leaks out is just a scrambled collection of thoughts, right? How does that create a clearly defined creature like the minoshiro?"

"There are templates in our collective unconscious. Jung, a psychologist, calls this an archetype. The shadow, the great mother, the wise old man, the trickster, and more. These characters appear in

myths all over the world because they are projections of the archetype. It would be really interesting to study which archetypes minoshiro and haythatchers come from."

I thought over everything I had just heard, but still wasn't sure if I understood it all.

"I don't know whether you're right about all that or not, but to be honest, I don't care. What I want to know is what's going on with you."

Shun was silent.

"You…"

At that moment I noticed something come waddling toward us from a corner of the room. I screamed.

"It's okay. It's just Subaru."

Shun went over and rubbed Subaru under the chin.

"What happened to him?"

"Nothing…really, I never meant to do anything."

The wasp balls began streaking chaotically around the room, but settled down when Shun looked up at them.

"You understand, don't you? All this is the result of what's happening to me."

Subaru's back was covered with a hard, spiky shell like some sort of monstrous armadillo.

"My cantus won't stop leaking out. It's growing in intensity and I'm becoming less able to control it. My unconscious is running wild, causing extreme leakage of my cantus, which wreaks havoc on everything around me. This is what Hashimoto-Appelbaum syndrome is. I've turned into a karma demon."

"That can't be…you're lying!" I shouted.

"Unfortunately, it's true."

Shun picked up Subaru, being careful not to touch the spikes on his back.

"All the books here are class four. Knowledge that was supposed to have been consigned to oblivion. Usually, they're stored in a secret room in the basement of the library. Your mother went out of her way to lend them to me."

"She did?"

"Reading these books is the only way to learn what it's like to turn into a karma demon. This is all we know."

The dusty books all had the class four seal burned into the covers. Class four was divided into three subcategories, the first was "bewitching", short for "bewitching words", the second read "disastrous", and the most dangerous third category read "catastrophic", meaning "divine catastrophe, transgression, worse than death".

"In return for lending me the books, I also have to record my own experience. After all, I'm just the most recent case."

"Don't say that! What about treatments? Isn't there any way to cure you?"

"There aren't any now."

Shun put Subaru down. The little dog waddled toward me.

"They used to think that Hashimoto-Appelbaum was related to schizophrenia, but that's been disproven. If anything, it's closer to having panic disorder," he said indifferently, as if talking about a

stranger. "If reality were an absolute, unchanging thing, then delusions and irrational fears would be curable. But since anxiety warps our perception of reality, there's nothing that can be done. The negative feedback caused by the discrepancy between delusions and reality creates a vicious cycle. What's even worse is that all this occurs on a subconscious level, making it impossible to deal with."

"Can't we seal your cantus?"

"Sealing it only prevents you from consciously using your power. It has no effect on the unconscious mind. Still, I thought that maybe having a mental restraint would lessen the leakage, so I had Head Priest Mushin seal my cantus. It was ineffective. My cantus is like something with a broken lid, nothing can hold it back."

I was terrified. "Could it be…I didn't restore your cantus properly, so it can't be sealed again?"

Unlike Satoru, Shun had been aware that he was being hypnotized at the time. Furthermore, he had already known what his mantra was. Forcibly unsealing his cantus under those conditions could have permanently removed the hypnotic anchor buried in his mind.

"No. There was never really any hope in trying to seal it in the first place. It's not your fault, Saki."

Tears spilled from my eyes. I couldn't do anything but reach down and pet Subaru.

"It's about time. You should go home now."

I shook my head, still crying.

"I can control the leakage for a short while by concentrating on a task and redirecting my cantus to it. During that time most of the ill effects can be suppressed. Right now, I'm focusing on controlling seven hundred wasp balls so that it doesn't affect you. But I can only keep this up for ten, fifteen minutes at most. Once my concentration starts to wane, my subconscious could go out of control at any time."

"No! I'm not leaving! I want to be with you."

"Saki, my condition has already caused my parents' deaths."

His words pierced my heart.

"They wanted to help me however they could. But there was nothing they could do. I tried my best to control my cantus through pure willpower, but that's the worst method to use. In the end, it rebounded with even greater force."

"Shun…"

"I thought I heard the house creak, and suddenly the ground liquefied and swallowed it whole. I was saved, probably because one of my parents used their cantus to eject me from the house at the last second."

I heard him sob into his mask.

"So hurry and leave. Please. I don't want to see anyone else I love die."

I stood up slowly. Despair and helplessness weighed me down.

I can't save Shun.

I can't do anything.

I…

At the door, I turned back to face him.

"Shun, is there anything you want me to do?"

He shook his head.

Suddenly, a gigantic animal slipped by me and into the bungalow.

It was a tainted cat with grey tiger stripes, twice as large as the black one I met earlier. It paid no attention to me and advanced on Shun, purring loudly.

Slowly, the cat stalked closer; its sharp glare was petrifying, but the purring in its throat conveyed no sense of enmity. Anyone who encountered the cat would be confused by these conflicting signals and temporarily be at a loss for what to do. This was the double bind technique that tainted cats used to trap their prey.

Having already experienced this tactic, I reacted first and quickly muttered my mantra.

"Saki, don't!" Shun's voice echoed. "It's enough already…"

His words stunned me. What should I do? I couldn't stand by and watch him be killed. But…

The three and a half meter long cat reached out as if to kiss Shun, and opened its mouth wide. I was about to release my cantus.

At that instant, Subaru leapt forward with a terrifying howl.

The tainted cat glanced at Subaru and brought its right paw up to meet him. Its razor-sharp claws cut into Subaru and blood sprayed everywhere. But thanks to the hard shell on his back, the wound wasn't fatal. Subaru didn't falter for a second and went straight for the cat's throat. It dodged with startling agility, but Subaru still managed to sink his teeth into a leg more than ten times his size.

Even now, I don't understand what happened. After generations of selective breeding, bulldogs should have completely lost their violent tendencies. The Subaru I knew was always aloof toward other dogs, and never went beyond barking or occasionally baring his teeth at them. You could almost describe him as being sullen.

So what was going through his head at that moment? What had happened to suddenly reawaken in him the bloodthirsty nature that his ancestors were known for?

As he viciously attacked an animal that, in all probability, was going to kill him, I remembered the legends that named bulldogs the strongest fighting dogs that would take on animals many times their size.

Subaru clamped his jaws tightly and shook his head from side to side. His upturned nose made it possible to breathe no matter how deeply he buried his teeth into enemy.

The tainted cat yowled with pain. But as a beast created to hunt humans, it had been endowed with more cunning than normal animals. It deftly flipped Subaru over with its other paw and held him on down on his back.

"Stop!" I screamed.

Razor-sharp claws came slashing down on Subaru's soft belly.

Everything that happened next seemed extremely surreal.

The cat flew up to the ceiling, legs spread wide like a giant flying squirrel. All eighteen of its claws were extended and its fangs were bared in a furious hiss, but its body was as stiff as if it had been crucified.

A thousand sparkling crystals appeared out of thin air and covered the cat completely.

The crystals melded together and turned into a half-transparent, shining jewel.

The tainted cat vanished.

Air rushed into the vacuum it left behind and created a small whirlwind.

What in the world did Shun do? All I could think of was that he had transported the cat to a different dimension.

Moving something without touching it probably meant surpassing the laws of physics. However, under normal circumstances, we are unable to manifest anything we can't picture in our mind.

In the short time since the door to Shun's unconscious had opened and turned him into a karma demon, he had acquired skills beyond any cantus expert's level.

I realized that Shun was kneeling beside Subaru's corpse.

"Poor thing…"

He had already stopped breathing. The floor was covered with blood. The cat had split Subaru open from stomach to heart in a single stroke.

"Shun," I crouched next to him.

"He tried to save me. Despite how futile it was." Shun said quietly. "I tried to leave him behind so many times. But he kept following me. …no, perhaps I was the lonely one. I'd be all alone without Subaru."

He rubbed Subaru's chin.

"I should have made my decision sooner. If I hadn't been so indecisive, Subaru wouldn't have had to suffer like this."

"It's not your fault," I said vehemently.

"It wasn't the cat's fault either. It's here simply because it was ordered to end my life. …I've taken too long to decide on what I should have done."

Shun pointed at a cupboard on the wall. "There's a bottle of pills in there, filled with different types of poison. They gave it to me before I came here. Don't you think it's a cruel parting gift?"

So that was how the adults handled Shun's situation, by making him end his own life? The thought didn't surprise me. Maybe I had been exposed to so much shock in rapid succession that I was now numb.

"I'm glad you didn't take any. You should throw them all away."

"I took them all."

"Huh?"

"But they didn't work. It was too late. I guess it's easy to change poisons on a molecular level. Though I was surprised when even arsenic couldn't kill me. It seems like my shadow, the part of my unconscious that doesn't want to die, is capable of altering even basic elements."

I put my hand on Shun's.

"…I think it's coming," he said to himself.

"What is?"

"Saki, hurry and get out of here!" he drew his hand away and stood up.

The house gave a loud thump. The wasp balls rose high in the air, vibrating intensely, then clattered to the ground.

"It's the same as that time. When my house was swallowed up… Isn't it funny? It's almost like the Spirit of Blessing. But instead of blessing you, it brings death."

He pushed me from behind, "Hurry!"

I tried to resist, but he overpowered me.

"I'll put an end to it now. I've had enough."

Before my eyes, the walls began to warp and shake. What looked like bubbles appeared and burst one after another. It was a chaotic scene. My head began to hurt again.

"Saki," Shun said quietly as he pushed me out the door.

His mask started melting even though there was no heat.

"I've always loved you."

"Why are you saying this now? Shun! I…"

"Goodbye."

The next second, I was hundreds of meters above the ground. I looked down at Shun's bungalow in the moonlight.

There was only a deep crater.

The earth around the crater started caving in. The air was filled with a low rumbling and sharp snapping sounds as trees were ripped up by the roots.

This apocalyptic scene slowly grew farther and farther away. I realized that I was flying backwards in a large arc. A strong wind buffeted my clothes this way and that. It blew away my barrette and my hair trailed out in front of me in the night sky.

If I just crashed into something and died, that wouldn't be too bad.

With that thought, I closed my eyes.

And opened them again.

Shun had saved me with the last of his strength.

I had to live.

I turned to face forward. The wind stung but I didn't close my eyes. My tears were blown away behind me.

It looked like I would land in a wide, grassy plain. I wondered if Shun had had this destination in mind when he flung me across the sky.

Slowly, the ground grew closer and closer.

Slowly, as if in a dream.

IV

Winter's Distant Thunder

1

Commotion surrounded me. The screeching of chairs being pushed back. The rhythm of footsteps on the wooden floor. The vibration of students jumping around. The sound of steam whistling from the pot on a stove in the middle of the classroom.

Voices with strange accents. Boisterous laughter. Conversations muffled as if I were listening underwater. Low mutters from an unknown person.

Everyone wanted someone to hear their words. But when all these voices joined together, they filled the air with a meaningless buzz.

Even if the thoughts of every person in the room were spoken aloud, they might all be the same thing. Each individual's thought has meaning, but when you put them together, they lose direction and become nothing more than a chaotic blend of noises. Just like our leaking cantus.

I was lost in a sea of incoherent thoughts. Leaking… What was it?

"What are you daydreaming about?"

The words appeared on my notebook. The 'o' in "you" had a winking face drawn in and the 'u' in "about" had been turned into a happy face. I turned and saw Maria looking somewhat concernedly at me.

"Just thinking about something."

"Let me guess. It's about Ryou?"

"Ryou?" I frowned.

Maria took my confusion to mean something else.

"No need to hide it. You're worried about whether he'll pick you, right? Don't worry. He definitely likes you."

Ryou Inaba. A cheerful boy who I had known since childhood. A natural leader everyone looked up to. But…I was suddenly filled with a sense of discomfort. Why him?

"Ryou's in team two though. Why would he choose me?"

"What are you saying, all of a sudden?" Maria exclaimed. "That was only in the very beginning, wasn't it? Ever since he joined team one, he's always hung out with us."

Oh right. Ryou had been added our team partway through. Because team two had six members and we only ever had four.

But why weren't there enough members to begin with…

"Saki, are you okay? You're acting kind of weird," Maria put her hand on my forehead as if to check if I had a fever. Then she suddenly closed the gap between us and kissed me on the lips.

"Stop it," I turned away hastily.

No one was looking at us, but I felt embarrassed all the same.

"See? Now you're all better," she said.

"I wasn't asking you to do that."

"You're hoping someone else would, eh?"

"I wasn't thinking that!"

"You two are pretty close," Ryou appeared behind Maria.

I felt my face turn red. Maria was going to misinterpret this too, I thought, and turned even redder.

"We're living out our love here. You jealous?" Maria asked as she hugged me to her chest.

"A little, to tell the truth."

"Of who?"

"Both of you, I guess."

"Liar."

Simply put, Ryou was smart, tall, and well-liked; you just couldn't ignore his existence.

On the other hand, he wasn't the type to think too deeply about things. He wasn't dumb by any means, but his responses never went beyond the surface of the issue at hand. And he wasn't particularly stellar at using cantus either…

This made me feel uneasy too. Who exactly was I comparing him to?

"Saki, can we talk before the afternoon classes start?" he asked.

"Hm. I'll get out of your way then," Maria floated up in the air and pirouetted, her long red hair fluttering behind her.

"Mamoru has only ever had eyes for you, you know," Ryou said to her. "When you won the preliminary poll by a landslide, it really shook him up."

She chuckled, "It's a sin to be too popular, isn't it?"

Maria flew away like a whimsical dragonfly and Ryou turned toward me.

"Let's go somewhere quiet."

"Alright."

I had no reason to refuse. I followed him out of the classroom, but stopped short when he made to turn left.

"Wait, I don't want to go over there."

"Why?" he looked a little incredulous.

"I…what do you want to do over there?"

I wasn't entirely sure why I didn't want to go in that direction either.

"No one will bother us there. It just leads to the inner yard."

Right. I didn't want to go near the inner courtyard. But why did I feel so opposed to it?

"Don't you want to go outside instead? The weather's so nice."

"Oh, sure."

We turned right in the hallway and went out into the schoolyard. The weather was indeed nice, but there was a chill in the air. Ryou wrapped his arms around himself for warmth. No doubt he was thinking that I was some crazy woman who didn't know what winter was.

"I'm going to nominate you as my duty partner," he said, cutting right to the chase.

"Thanks."

I wasn't quite sure what to say, so I used the safest reply.

"That's it?" Ryou sounded disappointed.

"What do you mean?"

"What are you going to do? Are you going to nominate me?" he pressed.

"I…"

This winter, everyone in Sage Academy would be broken up into pairs to serve on duty. In theory everyone would be in male-female pairs, but we didn't have the same number of each gender, so there would also be teams of three as well as pairs of the same gender.

On the surface, our duties encompassed only day-to-day and event preparations, but for some reason, a pair could only be formed if boy and girl chose each other. So in our minds, this was a nothing other than blatant declaration of love.

During that time, it was an undeniable reality that the school controlled all our romantic relationships. That was what 「番」 represented. The usual definition was to indicate turns for doing various tasks, but dictionary says that it also means 'couple'. Given that the Ethics Committee and Board of Education seemed to be obsessed with word meanings, this idea probably wasn't too farfetched.

"Sorry. I haven't decided yet."

Since Ryou had been so straightforward with me, I did the same.

"Do you have someone else in mind?" he asked worriedly.

"Umm, not really…"

Satoru's face popped into my mind, but I quashed the idea immediately. He was a good friend, but I didn't see him in a romantic way.

"Why are you choosing me?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Ryou answered confidently. "You've always been the only one for me."

"Always? Since when?"

"When? It's kind of hard to put a finger on something like that, right? But if I had to decide…I guess," Ryou suddenly looked a little uncertain, "when we were together during summer camp."

I remembered the star-filled night from two years ago.

"What's your favorite memory from camp?"

"That…all of it. Being together in the canoe. Oh, remember when you were so into the scenery that you almost fell in the river and I caught you at the last second? That was a close one."

I frowned. Did that really happen? There had been some dangerous situations during camp, but we had been separated during those times. So wouldn't it be more normal to remember our first night of camp, or the day we were reunited?

"What about night canoeing?"

"Night canoe?" Then he remembered. "Oh yeah, that was fun."

Fun… The memory of that night was important to me, and I didn't like that he summed it up with such a banal word.

We passed by Satoru on the way back to the classroom. He was looking in our direction with a strange expression on his face, but his gaze wasn't on me. No surprise there since he and Ryou had been in a relationship a while back.

But the look in his eyes gave me goosebumps. It wasn't a look of jealousy or infatuation. I can only describe it as an expression of pure confusion. Like someone who had seen something completely irreconcilable with reality.

That night I had a long, rambling dream. Most of it was forgotten as soon as I woke up, but the final scene was burned into my mind.

I was in a dim, empty place. In my hands I held a bouquet of flowers. I realized that I was in the school's inner courtyard. It was filled with gravestones as far as the eye could see. No matter how hard I tried, it was too dark to make out the words carved on the stone tablets.

I put the flowers on the grave directly before me. It was new, but the stone had already been weathered away and it sank into the ground as if melting into it. It was impossible to read the name on it.

As I stood there, an intense feeling of loneliness washed over me, like a hole had opened in my chest.

"Have you forgotten about me already?"

Someone spoke to me. A boy's voice. It was painfully familiar, but I didn't know whose it was.

"I'm sorry. I just can't remember."

"I see… I guess it can't be helped."

I turned in the direction of the voice, but no one was there.

"Where are you? Let me see your face."

"I don't have a face," he said quietly.

At these words, I recalled an infinite sadness. I see…he didn't have a face anymore.

"But you should know it well."

"I don't know. I can't remember."

"It's not your fault," the voice said kindly. "They erased my name after burying me."

"Who? Why would they do that?"

"Look over there. They've all been erased."

There was a cluster of gravestones piled together like a house of cards. Most of them had already crumbled away, rendering the names illegible.

"There, and there too."

Farther on, more gravestones stood silently. Those had no names to begin with, only a disc inlaid in the stone. As I approached, I realized that they were mirrors. If I got closer, would they reflect my face? My footsteps faltered.

"It's okay," the faceless boy said behind me. "Don't be afraid. That's not your grave."

"Whose is it?"

"Take a good look and you'll understand."

I peered into the mirror.

Light flickered in my eyes.

I put a hand up to block the dazzling light. Then slowly, I opened my eyes.

Daylight glimmered through a gap in the curtains.

I stretched, got up, and pulled back the curtains. The rising sun dyed the windowpane with yellow light. A few puffer sparrows flitted energetically from tree to tree.

It was the same morning scenery as always. I wiped my eyes. Even as I was dreaming I knew I had been crying.

I went and washed my face to prevent my parents from noticing.

The clock on the wall showed that it was not yet seven.

I thought about all the dreams I had ever had. Who did the voice belong to? Why did it sound so familiar, and why did it fill me with such sadness?

Suddenly I realized that the mirror in the dream was one I had seen before. Not in another dream, but in reality.

My heart started pounding. I had seen it when I was very young. Where though? Considering my age then, it couldn't have been too far away. Somewhere near the house… no, somewhere in the house. There had been a large box stuffed with all sorts of odds and ends that I thought of as a treasure chest. I would spend all day digging through it and not get bored.

The shed.

There was a large shed near our house. The top half was made of plaster and the bottom half was built with corrugated metal. It was surprisingly spacious inside and I had spent much of my childhood playing in there.

I put on a jacket, slipped quietly down the stairs, past the entrance hall, and out into the yard. The sharp morning air made my face sting, but felt thoroughly refreshing as I took a few deep breaths.

I opened the large door of the shed with some difficulty.

There was barely enough light coming through the wooden slats of the window to illuminate the inside. The room was about eight tatami mats large, packed full of shelves, with a staircase to the second floor at the far end.

Relying on my vague memories of the place, I went up the stairs. There were shelves along the wall, with sturdy wooden boxes on them.

Each box probably weighed a hundred kilograms or more. Using my cantus, I opened each in turn.

It was in the fifth box.

I took out a circular mirror about thirty centimeters in diameter. Unlike the usual silver-backed glass mirror, it was much heavier, absorbed heat very quickly, and appeared to be made of bronze. It was exactly the same as the one in my dream.

Slowly, memories began to resurface. I had definitely seen this mirror in the past. And probably more than once. I examined it carefully. Bronze left out for a long time would begin to oxidize, and in extreme cases, turn completely green. But the surface looked only slightly cloudy.

The last time I had seen the mirror was within the past five years at the very least. It must have been polished at that time.

I put the box back and brought the mirror outside with me.

I didn't want my parents to see, so I went around the house and set off down the waterway in Hakuren 4. Even though it was still early morning, there were already quite a few boats on the canal. The wind coming off the water was cold. Doing my best to be inconspicuous, I traveled down the less populated waterways and stopped at an empty dock.

I rubbed the mirror with the piece of cloth it came with to try to get rid of the cloudiness. It was more difficult that I had anticipated. I used my cantus, imagining the dirt falling off of the mirror, and gradually the bronze regained its pinkish-gold luster.

Ever since I found the mirror, I had been thinking that it was a magic mirror.

Magic mirrors are a kind of mirror created using a technique that has existed since the ancient times. You can't see anything by simply looking at it, but if you direct the light of the sun hitting it onto a surface, words or pictures appear in the projection. It worked by scattering light from micron-thin variations in thickness of the bronze. The projections only show up in sunlight; candles, torches, and phosphorescent lights have no effect.

In the past, the bronze first had to be ground down to the proper thinness, then the design was painstakingly scratched into the bronze and polished until it was invisible to the naked eye. But it was the subject of one of our first practical lessons at Sage Academy. In order to master the delicate touch needed to control our cantus, we all had to create a magic mirror. I remember completing mine in just one lesson. It said "Saki" and had arabesque designs on it. I thought I had done a splendid job.

I tracked the sun with the mirror and directed it at the wall of a building near the dock.

The letters that appeared in the circle of light were so clumsy that they seemed more like messy sketches. Still, they clearly spelled "Yoshimi".

When I entered the classroom, Ryou was chatting and laughing with his friends, as usual. Most of them were from team two.

"Hey, I'm counting on you today," Ryou said when he spotted me, smiling with perfect confidence.

"I need to talk to you."

"Sure, where should we go?"

"Doesn't matter, it won't take long."

I stood up and left the classroom. Ryou, aware that his friends were watching, put on an air of self-possessed calm and followed. I stopped in the middle of the hallway that led to the inner courtyard.

"There are a few things I want to ask you."

"Okay, shoot," he said, casual as always.

"It's about when we went night canoeing."

"You're still going on about that?" he said with a wry smile, shifting his gaze away.

"You taught me the basic tenet of night canoeing. Do you remember what it was?"

"Don't look at the fire."

The faceless boy's words echoed in my mind.

"Why?"

"The first rule of night canoeing is to get your eyes adjusted to the darkness before you go. Otherwise you won't be able to see anything when you start rowing."

"It was so long ago, I don't really remember… Something about watching out for the rocks, I guess?"

"That's fine. Here's something more recent then. Why did you break up with Satoru?"

Ryou was completely flummoxed.

"It…it doesn't matter anymore, does it?"

"You guys were such good friends. It even made me jealous."

"Oh really," he said uncomfortably.

"Okay, last question. It's about summer camp again."

"Fine, whatever," he replied carelessly.

"It's about the priest Rijin. Do you remember how he died?"

"Who's Rijin? …he died? What are you talking about?"

"It's fine," I interrupted his confused babbling. "I guess it really wasn't you."

"What do you mean?"

"I won't be putting your name down for pair duty."

Ryou stared at me in disbelief.

"What…why?"

"I'm really sorry. But I thought it would be polite to tell you beforehand."

I went back to the classroom, leaving him standing speechlessly in the hall. Satoru stood near the door.

"Saki, are you going to put his name down?" he asked sourly.

"Of course not."

"Huh? Why?"

I stared hard at Satoru, suddenly seeing him in a new light.

"Hey, why did you like Ryou?"

"Why…because…" he looked horribly confused. "I wonder. Now that I think about it, I have no idea."

"I see. I knew it. He's not a bad guy, but he's just not fit for the role."

"What?"

"I'm positive it wasn't him. The person we both love."

It took a moment for my words to sink in. His cheeks turned red. Although he didn't say anything, I saw the light return to his eyes.

Most pairs were decided in the first round of nominations. Although there were students who decided they had nothing to lose and put down the names of people they had no chance of being partnered with, most people had already discussed and decided their choices beforehand.

When Satoru and I were paired together, Ryou didn't give either of us a second glance. Immediately after, he was partnered with a girl from team two, which was no surprise.

The entire class was focused on who Maria would choose, and she decided on Mamoru without a moment's hesitation. This was probably Mamoru's just reward for being so devoted to her.

"What happened? Why didn't you choose Ryou?"

After class, we had gathered near the deserted waterway. Maria wanted to celebrate the four of us being paired off. Satoru and I told her the truth about what had happened. Rather than simply being doubtful of our story, she looked as if she suddenly thought we had gone insane.

"That's why it wasn't him. There were five people when we went to summer camp, but Ryou wasn't with us."

"That's impossible. I remember him. He was the first to find the haythatcher's nest."

Actually, I was the one who found it, but this wasn't the time to argue details.

"That wasn't Ryou."

"Then who was it?"

"I don't know. I can't remember his name."

"What was he like? What did he look like?"

"I can't remember his face either."

I remembered him saying in the dream that he didn't have a face.

"Do you really expect me to believe this? Is there something wrong with you, Saki?" Maria shook her head, smiling wryly.

I was offended by her condescending attitude.

"…but I can remember parts of what she's saying," Satoru said, coming to the rescue. "I remember going out with him…but now that I look back on it, I just can't see it being Ryou. He's not my type."

"Well we all know you go for cute little pretty-boys…like Rei." Maria folded her arms, looking smug. "Sometimes you don't know what you're doing. Maybe he was just persistent enough."

"No, I was the one who had to persuade him," Satoru said, turning red. "Anyway, I'm sure that our memories have been manipulated. The details just don't add up."

"Like what?"

"Ryou…no that's confusing, let's call him a different X. I remember going to X's house a lot when we were little. But it's different from Ryou's house. He lives in Outlook, right? It's up on the hill in an open area. But X's house is…"

"In the forest!" I shouted without thinking.

"Right. Way in the north. I remember it being a huge, isolated house."

"Now that you mention it…I'm starting to remember as well," Maria said, frowning.

Even with that expression, she still looked beautiful.

"I've never been to Ryou's or X's house." Mamoru suddenly spoke. "But where would this forest to the north be?"

I had been thinking about this too, but couldn't come up with anything that fit.

"Hey, name all seven of the towns in order," I said to Satoru.

"What? Now?"

"Just do it already."

Up until now, I never thought that Satoru would take orders from me, but he was surprisingly obedient now that we were duty pairs.

"Um, Oakgrove, Withertree, Whitesand, Gold, Waterwheel, Outlook, and Hayring, right?"

It was my turn to frown. These towns had been around all my life, but why did they sound so weird?

"If it's in the forest, would it be Oakgrove? But if it's in the north…" Maria had a look of intense concentration on her face now. "Withertree, I suppose. I'm not positive, but I don't think there are any big houses there."

"Yeah, it's hard to imagine it being there. And most of the area beyond that seems to be beyond the Holy Barrier."

The corner of Satoru's eyelid twitched as he spoke.

Seeing that, I gasped. This feeling… It was the same feeling I had many times in the past when I was on the cusp of remembering something. I wonder if other people noticed my eyes twitch during those instances. It was probably some sort of warning. A trigger buried in our mind that prevented us from remembering certain things.

"Let's go," I said.

Everyone stared at me.

"Where?"

"Withertree, of course."

"But we just had our pairs decided today. Everyone's out celebrating. Do we really have to go to that depressing place?" Maria complained.

It was true that Withertree wasn't exactly a lively town.

There were houses lined all around the dock, giving you the impression that you were in the bustling center of town. But if you went farther in, everything instantly became darker, with rows upon rows of abandoned houses. It was more a ghost town than anything.

"Where did everyone go?" Satoru asked, touching the closed shutters of the windows.

"Wasn't there a disaster of some sort and they all had to resettle in the other towns?" Mamoru said.

That was what I remembered too. Even in a small society like ours, there was still so much ambiguity surrounding the events that occur.

"Anyway, …X's house should be even farther north. Let's try looking for it," I urged them on.

We followed a narrow, inconspicuous path and met no one else along the way, which would have been impossible in any of the other towns.

After about an hour, we gradually began to see the after-effects of the "disaster" that had befallen Withertree.

There were large fissures here and there into which many trees had fallen. In some places, the ground had been vertically displaced a meter or more. It looked like the aftermath of a huge earthquake, but if there had been an earthquake of this magnitude, the entire district of Kamisu 66 would have been severely damaged.

Spreading out over a large area was what looked like a giant wrinkle. It formed a miniature mountain range over three meters tall in some places.

"What in the world happened?" Satoru whispered to himself.

"It must have been someone with a really powerful cantus to do something like this," Maria replied.

"Why, though?"

"I don't know any more than you do."

We stopped short as the path forward was blocked.

"The Holy Barrier…"

The red pines had fallen on each other like dominoes. At intervals, the trees had been pulled upright and tied with the thick rope of the barrier.

"Was Withertree always this small? We're already at the barrier," I said.

Satoru examined the rope.

"No, this rope is new…" he suddenly stopped and looked at me.

As if by telepathy, I knew exactly what he was thinking. Deja vu. We had had this exact conversation before; I was sure of it.

We walked along the rope and arrived at an open space on a hill that had been cleared of trees.

"I never knew something like this existed," Maria said, sounding awestruck.

A deep blue lake stretched out before us. It was almost a perfect circle, as if it had been formed from a crater. Since it was on the other side of the barrier, we couldn't go nearer for a better look, but it was easily over two hundred meters across.

And beyond that was an even bigger lake, so vast that we couldn't see the opposite shore. It might even go all the way to Kitaura. Unlike the smaller lake that was formed from collapsed earth, this appeared to be an old dam that had flooded a large part of the forest when it was built. That was probably where the name Withertree came from.

"There can't be any houses farther out," Mamoru said, sounding like he wanted to leave as soon as possible. "You're misremembering. X doesn't exist."

"Then why…" Maria said weakly, "do I feel like I know what Saki and Satoru are talking about? That the person I knew wasn't Ryou, but some other boy."

"It's just a trick of the mind. All of us are growing up fast these days, but it's not just that we're getting taller, our looks and personality are changing as well."

Satoru and I looked at each other.

Mamoru's words were quite different from how we really felt. To me, it felt like time was crawling along slower than a snail. I was a bug trapped in amber, doomed to be suspended in eternity.

"Wasn't there someone else too…?" Maria said suddenly.

We thought hard.

"It doesn't really make sense that we started out with only four people. Before Ryou joined, X should have been with us. But then we're still one short. I can't really remember, but I think there was another person."

Slowly, the image of a girl surfaced in my mind. Then the gravestones piled upon each other like a house of cards I had seen in my dream.

"There was. I remember," Satoru said, rubbing his temples as if he had a headache. "Like with X, it looks like some of my memories of that person remains. But why does no one ever talk about them?"

"Stop it!" Mamoru shouted. "It isn't right. We shouldn't be prying into this. If we keep talking about it…" he stopped, looking terrified.

"What? You think we'll be disposed of?"

There was a cold silence after I said that.

"Saki, didn't we talk about this at summer camp too?" Maria asked, her face pale.

"We did. I think we did. I can't remember anything specific though. I hit a wall or something when I pursue that train of thought," Satoru said. "But I do remember talking to Saki about it. And also everyone else too. Around the campfire. X agreed with what I said then."

Satoru was pushing on his temples with both palms as if trying to get rid of a horrible headache.

"Stop! I don't want to listen to this any more. We shouldn't be talking about this! We're violating the Code of Ethics!" Mamoru screamed hysterically.

This was the first time I had ever seen him lose control like that.

"Alright. Calm down," Maria put her arms around him and patted him soothingly. "Let's drop it. …okay, you two?" she glared at us.

We nodded.

The magic mirror projected its image onto the dark planks of the fence.

Satoru and Maria were silent for a moment. Mamoru had gone home already, saying that he felt sick.

"What do you think?" I pressed.

Satoru finally spoke. "Um. …it's pretty crude, but I think that's because the creator was a beginner at using their cantus."

"Yeah, it's basically the same as what we did for our assignment," Maria agreed.

"Now do you believe that I'm telling the truth?"

"I never thought you were lying in to begin with. And I believe that it was possible you had a sister. Just, isn't it a bit far-fetched to assume that she was eliminated by the school?"

"If she had died of an accident or sickness, they wouldn't have had to hide it from me, right?"

Maria avoided my eyes. "I guess that's true. But maybe they just wanted to protect you from having sad memories."

"But look at the characters. Don't they seem too clumsy? Like Satoru said, my sister must have been bad at using her cantus."

"I won't deny the possibility, but it's still just speculation."

Satoru took the mirror from me and adjusted the angle at which it projected onto the fence.

"Now that I look at it, I wouldn't say that it's all badly done. The characters are carved properly stroke by stroke. It's just that they're kind of crooked and overlap each other…"

At the time I didn't understand what Satoru was trying to get at. Much later, I learned that this kind of writing was caused by a type of visual impairment, and was surprised at how perceptive Satoru was. I strongly suspect that my sister had been judged to be inadequate at cantus because of her vision problems, but now that most records have been lost, I would never know for sure.

It appears that these vision problems had been called nearsightedness or astigmatism back in the old days. To treat it, people wore glasses with lenses of various prescriptions. This brought their vision back to normal and they could live life without any problems.

"Anyway, I did have a sister." I took the mirror back from Satoru and held it up high. "This is the proof."

"Cut that out," Satoru said quietly, "you'll get in trouble if anyone sees you."

"Saki, I understand how you feel," Maria whispered with her arms around my shoulders. "But please don't stir up any more trouble."

"Stir up trouble? I just want to know the truth," I said indignantly. "Not just about my sister, but also that girl in our team. And even more importantly…"

X. The faceless boy. The person I loved more than anyone else, whose face I could no longer recall.

"Our friend."

"I understand. It's not easy for me either. I have so many memories of him, but all the vital parts are missing. I want to do something about it just as much as you do. But I'm more worried about the friends that are alive right now."

"You don't have to worry about me."

"I'm not. Because you're strong," she said.

"Me?"

"Yes. I can tell this is harder on you than anyone else. But you're enduring it. I don't think most people could bear that pain."

"What exactly do you take me for?" I said, shaking off the arm she had around my shoulder.

"Don't take it the wrong way. I'm not saying you're heartless. On the contrary, you're more sensitive than most. But you're able to shoulder that pain and sadness and live on."

My anger subsided as I saw the tears in her eyes.

"We're not as strong as you. I always act big, but I'm the first to run away when things get bad. …but there's someone even weaker than me or Satoru."

"You mean Mamoru?" Satoru asked.

"Yes. Mamoru is too kind and fragile. He would never recover from betrayal. Not just by people, but also by the world he believes in…" Maria slowly put her arms around me. "The world is full of things that should probably be left unknown. Don't you think that sometimes the truth is the cruelest of all? Not everyone can bear it. I'm certain Mamoru would lose it if you brought up any more of these frightening truths."

Nobody spoke for a few moments. I sighed.

"Okay."

"Really?"

"I promise Mamoru won't hear another word of it." I hugged her tightly. "But I won't give up until I find the truth. Because if I don't…it would haunt me forever."

The faceless boy. I wasn't going to let him be forgotten just like that. It would mean he had never existed in the first place. I would get back my memories of him no matter what.

The three of us embraced, kissed, comforted each other and drew strength from each other's presence.

We headed back to the dock just outside the town of Waterwheel. The place was usually empty, and the fence that ran along the waterway made it the perfect spot for our meeting.

As we untied our boats, a voice called to us from behind.

"Do you have a minute?"

I turned to see a middle-aged man and women standing on the dock. There weren't many people in Kamisu 66 I had never seen, but these two were completely unfamiliar to me. The woman who had spoken was short and plump and gave off an aura of harmlessness. The man was also slightly chubby and smiled kindly at us.

"You're Saki Watanabe, right? And Maria Akizuki, and Satoru Asahina?" he said.

"Yes," we answered confusedly.

"Don't be so nervous. We would like a few words with you, that's all."

Were we going to be eliminated? We glanced at each other, but didn't know what do to.

"Um…are you from the Board of Education?" Satoru asked bravely.

"No, we're working under your grandmother." The plump woman smiled at him.

"Really?" Satoru relaxed.

What was going on? I had never heard anything about Satoru's grandmother before. The woman saw the confused expression on my and Maria's face and smiled again.

"Satoru Asahina's grandmother is Tomiko Asahina, the head of the Ethics Committee."

2

We rode in a windowless houseboat like the one I took to the Temple of Purity. However, this time the boat went by the normal waterways and did not make pointless changes in direction to try to throw off our sense of direction, so I had a rough idea of where we were.

The dock was a normal dock as well. That was a little anticlimactic since I was expecting to be taken outside the Holy Barrier.

I spotted the town hall and library where my parents worked out of the corner of my eye as we headed toward a narrow alley branching off of the town's main street.

The Ethics Committee was set up just outside the center of Hayring. It looked just like a normal shop until we entered the front gate. I saw a long hallway stretching out before me and realized it was actually a pretty big building.

We arrived at a quiet inner parlor. There was sandalwood incense burning and a scroll depicting winter peonies hanging in the alcove.

Next to a large lacquered table were three deep purple floor cushions lit by the light filtering through the paper windows. We sat down apprehensively.

"Please wait here for a moment," said the woman escorting us, and slid the door shut.

"What's going on?" Maria and I asked Satoru in unison.

"You never told us your grandmother was the head of the Ethics Committee."

"You haven't been spying on us for her, have you?"

"Hey, wait a sec," Satoru said, recoiling. "I didn't know either."

"Didn't know what?"

"That my grandmother…I mean Tomiko Asahina was the head of the committee."

"Liar."

"You've gotta be kidding me. How could you not? You're her grandson."

"Just hear me out." Satoru backed away from us so hastily that he fell off the cushion. "You guys didn't know who the head was either, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Unlike with other jobs, the members of the Ethics Committee aren't public knowledge. The members keep their own identities secret as well."

"Couldn't you tell somehow?" Maria asked, still suspicious.

"Not at all," Satoru said seriously, sitting up cross-legged.

"But she's your grandmother," she said obstinately.

"I'm perfectly aware of tha…"

"Excuse me," a voice came from the other side of the door.

Satoru hurriedly sat back on the cushion. Maria and I also turned and sat down properly.

"Sorry for making you wait."

The door slid open and the woman from before came in with a tray of teacups. She set them down in front of us along with some snacks.

"We'd like to talk to you individually, so would you please follow me one by one?"

I wondered what would happen if I refused, but of course that wasn't an option.

"Well then, Saki Watanabe, please come with me."

I was dying for a drink but had no choice except to follow her out into the hall.

"The man who was supposed talk with you all is Mr. Niimi, the man who was with you earlier. Oh, I haven't introduced myself. I'm Kinomoto. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you," I said, giving a quick bow.

"…anyway, when I informed the chairman of your arrival, she asked to speak to you directly instead. So we are going to her office now."

"Oh, you mean, Satoru's…Tomiko Asahina?"

"Yes. She's very kind, so don't be so nervous."

There was no point in her saying that. My heart, which had already been beating quite fast, began pounding even more vigorously.

"Excuse me," Kinomoto bent down on one knee and knocked on the door.

I waited with trepidation.

"Come in," a clear female voice replied.

The door opened and we entered what appeared to be a drawing room that was twice as large as the parlor we had come from. There was an elegant alcove on the left inside, inside which was an attached study, and opposite it was a set of staggered shelves.

"Bring her in please." The grey-haired woman seated at the table spoke without looking up.

"As you wish."

In the middle of the room was a low table similar to the one in the parlor. I sat down on a cushion in front of it.

"Well then, excuse me." Kinomoto retreated swiftly.

I felt as if I had been abandoned in a cage with a wild animal. My hands and feet were cold and my throat was dry.

"Saki Watanabe? Mizuho-chan's daughter," the grey-haired woman said.

Apart from the lines around her mouth, she had no other wrinkles and looked younger than I expected.

"Yes."

"Don't be so nervous. I'm Tomiko Asahina. I hear you're good friends with Satoru."

She stood up gracefully and came over to sit with her back to the alcove. She wore a delicately patterned silver-grey outfit that matched her hair.

"Satoru…Satoru-san and I have been friends since we were little."

"I see," she smiled.

She appeared to be in her mid-sixties. With her large eyes and shapely features, she must have been very beautiful in her youth.

"Just as I thought. You have wonderful eyes. They're full of light."

People often complimented my eyes. Probably because there was nothing else to compliment. I also often heard them say that there's light in them, but then again, people who have no light in their eyes are usually dead.

"Thank you."

"I've always wanted to talk with you at least once."

She didn't seem to be saying this out of mere politeness. I was confused.

"Why?"

"Because you will someday succeed me."

My jaw dropped. I couldn't think of a response.

"Surprised? This isn't a half-baked idea or a joke though."

"But…there's no way I'm fit for the role."

"Hohoho. That's what Mizuho-chan said too. Like mother like daughter."

"Did you know my mother?" I asked, leaning forward.

Although I had been extremely nervous earlier, Tomiko Asahina had a special way of making you drop your defenses and open up to her.

"Yes, very well. Ever since she was born," she said in a voice that went right to the depths of my heart. "Mizuho-chan has a special knack for leading people. She's doing an excellent job as librarian. But my position requires more than that. And it's something no one but you have."

"But…why me? I'm still a student, and my grades aren't that good."

"Grades? You mean your cantus? You're not interested in being someone like Shisei are you?"

"Well…even if I wanted to, I couldn't."

"Your aptitude for cantus is not the only thing tested in school. There's also the personality index. It's something we never let the students know about."

"Personality index?"

Tomiko smiled, revealing teeth unnaturally white for her age. "In every era, what is demanded of a great leader is not some special ability but their personality index."

All at once, I felt everything become lighter. Until then, I had been oppressed by all the things I felt inferior about.

"Do you mean things like their intelligence, or sensitivity, or leadership skills?" I asked fervently.

But Tomiko shook her head gracefully. "No, It has nothing to do with intelligence. Or sensitivity. And leadership abilities are acquired through various social experiences."

"Then…?"

"The personality index is a number that indicates a person's stability. It is their ability to maintain a grasp on themself and carry on without breaking down no matter what kind of unexpected situation or psychological crisis occurs. That is the most important quality in a leader."

Somehow that didn't make me particularly happy. I recalled Maria saying that I was strong. Didn't that just mean that I was insensitive?

"So my score is high?"

"Yes, wonderfully so. Possibly the best in the history of the Academy." Suddenly a sharp look came into her eyes. "But that's not all. The most remarkable thing is even after all of you discovered the truth, there was no permanent decline in your score."

I felt the blood rush to my face. "What are you referring to…?"

"From the false minoshiro, you learned the blood-stained history of our society, and the thin ice of peace upon which we now tread. After you returned, we subjected you to a thorough psychological assessment and monitored your subsequent behavior. Your personality index stabilized in a remarkably short amount of time after the initial shock. The other four took much longer to return to normal."

So after learning the truth, we had been observed like guinea pigs. Although I had expected that to some degree, it was still a huge blow to me.

"Could it be…you had it planned out since the beginning?"

"Hardly." The kind expression returned to Tomiko's face. "We'd never take such a big risk. All we knew was that you were planning to break the rules. But catching a false minoshiro…a library terminal from the previous era, nobody could have predicted that."

Was that true? I couldn't bring myself to trust her completely.

"So the results of the test…"

"No. To be able to shoulder the fate of all the people as their highest leader, one needs to have a broad mind and nerves of steel when faced with the truth. You have both."

Broad-minded was a convenient phrase. Anyone could accept something beautiful. The important thing was to be able to calmly accept the dirty and ugly things as well.

"We broke the rules and learned what we weren't supposed to. Why weren't we disposed of?"

Even though my tone had suddenly become accusing, Tomiko did not seem to mind.

"I understand what you're trying to say. This isn't an excuse, but whether or not you are disposed of isn't under our jurisdiction. That belongs to the Board of Education."

"Their chairman is Hiromi-chan. You know her, right? She's always been a worrier. I can't help but feel that her worrying has been even worse lately."

Hiromi-chan…I had heard that Hiromi Torigai was on the Board of Education, but never knew she was the chairman. She was my mother's good friend and I remember her often staying over for dinner. She seemed to be an introverted person, with a small, skinny build, and a voice almost too quiet to hear. So she had the power to dictate the life or death of any of the students, and frequently made these coldhearted decisions? I couldn't believe it.

"The Ethics Committee is the highest authority in the district, but we usually don't interfere with the Board of Education's decisions. You guys were the exception. I asked them not to dispose of you."

"Because of Satoru?"

"No. I would never let personal sentiments get in the way of such an important matter. You were the reason. You are indispensable for the future of the towns."

So we had almost been murdered. Somehow even knowing that didn't disturb me.

But what was the real reason we had been spared? It was hard to accept, but was it really because I was as important as Tomiko said? No one had ever said anything like this to me before, so I was completely confused. I wondered if it was possible that they couldn't easily kill off the head librarian's daughter. …but if that was the case, then my sister should have been spared too.

"But don't think badly of Hiromi-chan and her people. They're driven by a sort of paranoia."

"Paranoia…?"

Did possessing the power to end the lives of others cause abnormalities in their mind?

"Hm. Perhaps that was a bad choice of words. I have the same fears too."

"Fears of what?"

Tomiko looked surprised. "Isn't it obvious? There are only two things in this world we really have to fear. Fiends and karma demons."

I was speechless. The two nursery-tales I had heard again and again as a child came to mind.

"But Hiromi has never seen a fiend or karma demon. Unlike me. That's why I always say they're simply driven by paranoia."

"So you've actually…"

"Yes, I've seen them. Up close and personal too. Would you like to hear about it?"

"Yes."

Tomiko closed her eyes for a moment and began speaking softly.

Records detail the exploits of close to thirty fiends throughout the world. Apart from two, all have been boys. I think this shows that no matter how much we try, we can't break the curse that is male aggression.

This student was also a boy. Unfortunately I can no longer remember his name. Although this happened a long time ago, I can still remember every detail, just not the name. That's always seemed strange to me. Maybe there was some reason I wanted to forget it.

Although there's also a detailed file on the incident in the library, only the initials YK remain. We don't even know which letter represents the given name and which represents the surname. We're not sure why it was written like that, but one explanation was that the old Japanese laws were temporarily revived during the transitional period before the Code of Ethics was enacted. And in it, the 61st article of the youth protection act that was in effect… Well, that doesn't matter now.

Anyway, we call that child K.

At the time, K was a first year student at Leadership Academy. Leadership Academy is the predecessor to the current Sage Academy. He had just turned thirteen. …that's right, he was a year younger than you are now.

In the beginning K appeared to be a completely average, inconspicuous student. The first sign of his abnormalities came from the Rorschach test that all new students took. The test is no longer

given, but it entails having the student look at an inkblot made from a folded sheet of paper and analyzing their personality from the images associated with the blot.

Based on his answers, it was determined that K was habitually under an unusually large amount of stress. But it was unclear what the stressors were. On the other hand, all of the associations he made with the inkblots were unusually violent. It was likely that the desire for destruction and murder was deeply entrenched in his subconscious. For some reason, his abnormalities were not taken seriously at the time; even his test results raised no concerns until they were reexamined after the incident.

K's abnormality became apparent as he learned to master his cantus at Leadership Academy.

His ability to manipulate his cantus was average, or just below average. But in situations where normal students struggled, K seemed to come alive. There aren't any specific examples, but in various competitions where there was the possibility of injuring other people, K continued to use his cantus completely without hesitation.

K's homeroom teacher quickly noticed this behavior and brought it before the Board of Education multiple times, saying that they should take precautionary measures. But no effective measures were taken. There were a number of reasons for this.

First, the previous appearance of a fiend was over 80 years ago, and the memories of that incident had been largely forgotten. The sense of danger was dulled. Second, K's mother was known as an outspoken member of the town council. At the time, everything was decided by the town council, so it was extremely difficult to pass any extreme measures on the school. Third, the bureaucratic bodies governing the schools had a widespread policy of peace-at-any-price. Though historically, it's questionable whether there was ever a time when this policy was not in effect.

And fourth, there were no effective mechanisms to deal with such a situation at the time.

So in the end, nothing was done except to give K regular counseling. He was not dealt with, and was allowed to continue while they watched from the sidelines.

Then one day, seven months after he entered school, it finally occurred.

Tomiko looked up at the ceiling and sighed deeply. Then she stood up and went over a small cupboard and brought out a teapot and two cups. She poured hot water from a kettle on the table and started making tea.

I drank the fragrant tea and waited for her to continue.

To tell the truth, only a few records of the incident remain. In particular, the beginning of the incident is almost entirely unknown. What started it? What was the sequence of events that led to so much destruction? All of this is left up to speculation, but it did happen. Over a thousand lives were lost, that was the grave reality of the situation.

It's almost certain that his homeroom teacher was the first to die. Her injuries were so severe that it was difficult to verify her identity when the body was found. Then the twenty-two students in his year, the second years, the third years, the corpses of about fifty students were found in horrifying condition…

K was a true fiend. He had reverted to the primitive state of his ancestors–a monster that had absolutely no attack control. Furthermore, the death feedback that he should have been born with

failed to function. Statistically, the chance of a child who lacked both of these traits being born was about three million to one, in other words, almost nonexistent in a district like Kamisu 66. But statistics are only statistics.

To some extent, K's family must have known he was abnormal. His mother in particular seemed to have been aware of it since he was a baby. She had him undergo various psychological and correctional therapies when he was young. One of these therapies was something similar to brainwashing. Maybe because of it, his aggressive instinct was suppressed during his childhood.

But whether this was a good thing still remains a question. It is still suspected that the forceful suppression of his violent tendencies was the reason for his stress.

What happened on that fateful day to make him snap?

Or rather, what was it that caused his human disguise to break and unleash the fiend within him?

Going by the all the data we have on fiends, it seems like the first person is crucial. There have been a number of cases where fiends did not go on a rampage. After all, even without attack inhibition or death feedback, humans can still decide logically that it is wrong to kill.

But once they kill their first victim, a switch flips in their brain and they will go on killing without end. The massacre only stops when the fiend dies. There is no exception to this.

K ripped off his teacher's arms and legs then smashed her head like a ripe fruit. Then he picked off the terrified students one by one, slamming them into the walls of the classroom with so much force they were completely crushed.

It looked like a scene from hell. 90% of the people who helped clean up the aftermath suffered extreme PTSD and had to quit…

The fiend left the classroom and wandered the school in search of more prey. The children who tried to run were picked off like flies. Others were rounded up–many were trampled to death in the process–and slaughtered en masse.

No one could lift a finger against him. There were many students more adept at using cantus than K, but they were tied down by attack inhibition and death feedback…in other words, no one could attack the fiend directly.

Since K himself had no attack inhibition, it was possible he killed preemptively out of fear that others could also attack him.

Another theory is that he became intoxicated by the endorphins released in his brain and simply could not stop himself. That's why Raman-Klogius syndrome is also called "Fox in the Henhouse" syndrome.

By the way, Raman and Klogius are not the names of scientists. They are the names of two children, one from Mumbai and the other from Helsinki, who slaughtered tens of thousands of people. Two of the worst fiends in history who gave their names to the world's most abominable disease.

Compared to those two, less than a tenth of the number of people died at K's hands. But I think it was no less brutal. Compared to the big cities from the previous era, Kamisu 66 has a considerably lower population density, so, fortunately…if you could call it fortunate, only a thousand died.

Also, there was someone who sacrificed himself to stop K. We owe everything to him.

Tomiko paused and sipped her cold tea. I was so overwhelmed by the story that I sat rigid in my seat, all but forgetting to breathe.

Everything I had heard so far was so terrifying and depressing that I hurt physically. But I was dying to hear the ending just the same.

Suddenly I wondered why she asked if I wanted to hear the story. Maybe she was telling the truth about me succeeding her someday, and this was some sort of test.

Having killed every living being in sight, K left the silent school. He walked down the road as if nothing were wrong. During this time only one person K set eyes upon survived by some miracle. But he said that he didn't feel anything amiss at that moment. Just a short boy walking along the road. A scene you'd see any other day of the week.

But what happened right after that was completely unbelievable.

There were some people headed toward him on the road. A group of agricultural workers from Lotus Farms. When they were forty or fifty meters away from K, the torso of the leader of the group exploded in a mist of blood.

As the warm, wet fog clouded everything around them, the rest of the group stood frozen, not knowing what had happened. K continued walking toward them without changing pace, and one by one, the workers were reduced to bloody lumps of flesh.

Gradually, K rounded a bend in the road and out of sight. The two people who first realized that something was wrong managed to find a place to hide. One was determined to run and get help, the other cowered on the ground, paralyzed by fear.

K came to a halt. Perhaps he sensed them hiding and wanted to lure them out. Then, when one tried to escape, he snapped his neck as casually as if picking a fruit off a branch.

Once again K went on his way, leaving the surviving witness in a state of shock so severe that he couldn't even move. He was rescued the next day, but after being forced to recount the events that had happened, spent the rest of his life in a nearly crippled state.

I've thought about this incident more times than I can count. So I can say with confidence that K was truly the textbook description of a fiend.

Earlier, I said that K's skill with cantus was average at best. One of the comments on his remaining report cards says "lacks imagination and creativity". But in using his power for murder he was a genius.

Perhaps it's a little imprudent to say that. But the ingenuity of his plans put all other fiends to shame, and it was apparent that he had been planning to eliminate the entire town right from the start.

He started by destroying buildings and clogging up the canals. Then he set fire to parts of the town and cut off all but one emergency route. Once these preparations were done, he began his massacre.

People ran around wildly, trying to escape, not knowing that they were already trapped in the palm of K's hand.

If at the time people had scattered, each running in their own direction through the rubble and burning buildings, a good number could have survived. But no one did. In their panic, everyone ran in the same direction. It's typical mob psychology. They took the one open path they saw.

The path led them into a forest, where the thick grove of trees gave them a false sense of security. But when chased by a cantus-wielding fiend, this was nothing short of suicide.

Once he was sure that everyone had entered the forest, K created a ring of fire on its outer edge, trapping the townspeople inside. The ring gradually shrank as the fire spread. But true to his fiendish nature, he did not burn them all alive. Instead, he opened up a path in the burning trees.

The townspeople had no choice but to run to their demise like mice in a maze.

"So. Do you still want to hear more?"

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

"Even hearing about it is sickening, isn't it? I can tell from your expression. Why do you want to continue?"

"…I just want to know how K was stopped."

"Alright," Tomiko smiled slightly.

Once he had killed every last person in the forest, K returned to the town. He walked around searching for survivors and killing them in an almost trance-like state. It was the beginning of winter and K appeared to have forgotten to dress properly. In the middle of the night, he became aware that he had caught a bad cold.

K first went to the half-demolished town hospital. Though he most likely didn't expect there to be any doctors there. He probably just wanted to look for medicine. But there was one doctor, trying frantically to save the few survivors who were on the brink of death. That man, Doctor Tsuchida, saved the town. And I happened to be there at the time, so I know the entire story.

Surprised? I was a nurse then. Only Doctor Tsuchida and I were at the hospital with the severely wounded and sick patients when K came.

It was obvious from just one look that he was the fiend. His eyes were different. They were rolled back, not like the so-called sanpaku eyes, but almost completely rolled back so that you couldn't see the irises at all. I wondered if he could even see. There was no light in his eyes at all.

His hair looked oily and clumped, and his skin was splotchy. When I realized that it was because of all the blood spattered on him, my legs started shaking uncontrollably.

K walked by me silently and entered the examination room. Without any explanations or threats, he said that he had a cold and wanted medicine. I couldn't see Doctor Tsuchida, but heard him tell K to sit down.

I entered the room without being called, thinking that I couldn't leave Doctor Tsuchida in there alone. He glanced at me but said nothing. He opened K's mouth and examined his throat. It was a bright red color I had never seen before. He must have been in some pain. He also had a fever and shivered constantly as if he had a bad chill.

I can't say for sure whether it really was a cold or not. As he had slaughtered all those people, he must have breathed in large amounts of blood as it sprayed everywhere. His symptoms could

have been some sort of allergic reaction. If that was the case, you could almost say it was revenge against K from those who died.

Doctor Tsuchida spread Lugol's iodine on K's throat then told me to go to the farthest storage room to get antibiotics. I hated the thought of using precious medicine on a fiend, but did as I was told and went to find the penicillin. Most of the stock had been used for the wounded survivors, so I had to spend some time searching for more from the pile that was to be discarded for being almost past the expiry date.

So I didn't see what happened during that time. But from the evidence left, it's clear what happened.

Doctor Tsuchida had taken the potassium chloride tablets from the emergency medicine cabinet and mixed multiple times the lethal dosage in distilled water. Then pretending that it was cold medicine, injected it into K's arm.

Suddenly there came a scream, and I dropped the antibiotics I had finally managed to find. I ran to the examination room.

Then I heard something explode violently, and saw that the entire room had been dyed a deep red. K had blown Doctor Tsuchida's head off.

The terrible screaming continued. K was in the throes of death, but he just wouldn't die. He sounded as if he were possessed. But the screams gradually weakened until they became a child's sobs. Then silence…

Tomiko finished speaking and stared into her cup.

I should have had a million questions for her, but I was unable to speak.

"…it took a lot of time and perseverance for the town to recover from the fiend's attack. The first thing we did was to eliminate everyone in K's bloodline."

"Eliminate everyone in his bloodline…?" I repeated.

"K's lack of attack inhibition and death feedback were two major genetic faults. There was a very high chance that everyone related to him carried the same defective genes. So we traced his ancestry back five generations and eliminated everyone in the family tree. Please don't mistake this for revenge. We had to do this because we couldn't risk anyone else becoming a fiend."

"But how did you eliminate…?" my hands shook slightly.

"Yes. Since I've already told you this much, there's no point in hiding anything else. We used queerats. We created a troop of forty queerats from the most loyal colony, gave them weapons and instructions to kill the remaining bloodline in the dead of night. If these people were to learn of this, they could have dealt with the queerats without any difficulty, so the plan was very carefully laid out. Even so, over half the queerats were killed, but they would have had to be eliminated anyway, so you could say the plan was a complete success," Tomiko said casually, as if discussing a town-wide cleanup event. "But that wasn't enough. Even with K's bloodline gone, there was no guarantee that fiends wouldn't appear again. So we completely revised the education system. We scrapped Leadership School and created Sage Academy, where every aspect of the student was managed in terms of performance values. The Board of Education was given more power and answered to no

one but the Ethics Committee. Finally, part of the Code of Ethics was rewritten to delay the age when basic human rights become applicable."

"What do you mean?"

Tomiko refilled the teapot and poured two new cups of tea.

"According to the old Code of Ethics, a fetus was considered to have human rights at 22 weeks of age. That rule was created in regards to the period of time during which an abortion could be performed, but the new Code made it so that a child did not have human rights until their seventeenth birthday. This meant that up until a child turned seventeen, the Board of Education had the power to order their disposal."

I can't even describe the shock I felt when I learned that under the law, I was the same as an semi-developed fetus–non-human. We were never told about this in Harmony School or Sage Academy. To begin with, I've never questioned at what age were human rights endowed, or whether I already had human rights.

"The method of disposal was also refined. Because no matter how loyal the queerats are, giving a being with that level of intelligence permission to kill people was just asking for trouble in the future. So normal household cats were bred selectively with cantus to created tainted cats."

Tainted cats…that phrase brought up intense emotions that had been repressed for a long time. Fear. And sadness.

"And after that, thanks to the thorough measures we undertook to stamp out any dangerous factors before anything happened, no more fiends appeared. But another terrible incident occurred. I remember this one quite clearly, as it happened only about twenty years ago." Tomiko drank her tea in one gulp and started the story.

The dangers of cantus leakage had been identified as early as the final years of the ancient civilization. But destructive leakage, called bad spills, was overlooked and underestimated for a long time. At most, leakages would cause delicate machinery to malfunction, and objects would become a little warped, but it was never thought to pose any harm to humans or animals. And in truth, that was the case most of the time.

It was around then that a girl, Izumi Kutegawa, proved us wrong. Her cantus polluted everything around her like radiation. She was an only child who lived on a farm on the outskirts of Gold. Once she hit puberty and the spirit of blessing had visited her, the animals on her farm had an unusually high rate of deformities. Most of her crops withered, and in the beginning, we suspected that it may have been caused by a new virus.

Even at Sage Academy, anything placed within ten meters of her would show signs of deforming. Chairs and desks became unusable in a short amount of time, and even the walls and floor would begin to bubble and grow long whiskery mold like a scene from some nightmare.

The Ethics Committee and Board of Education gathered a group of specialists to investigate the situation. When they determined that the bad spill of her cantus could damage even human DNA, it caused a huge uproar. She was ordered to withdraw from school and told to study at home, but by then, the range of her spill had extended to unthinkable proportions. The gears of a clock tower six kilometers away were twisted out of place, causing the clock to stop moving entirely.

We held council and reached the conclusion that she suffered from Hashimoto-Appelbaum syndrome and would have to be disposed of as a karma demon. As the head of the Committee, I wanted to tell her this in person, but it had already become too dangerous to approach her. So I wrote her a letter and had it delivered by a karakuri puppet.

Even now it pains me to remember. Izumi was truly a kind and gentle soul. However, as history has shown, those are precisely the ones most in danger of becoming karma demons.

Once Izumi learned that peoples' lives were in danger because of her, she proposed her own elimination.

Since Kutegawa Farm was ground zero of the bad spill, every living thing on the farm had already died. We told Izumi that her parents and all the farmhands managed to escape from danger, but the truth was that they had already died from a strange disease that caused fibrosis throughout their bodies.

The last time I saw the farm, it had transformed into an amorphous, amoeba-like thing that, to this day, swallows everything it touches.

The puppet brought five pills to a small building on the edge of the farm that had not yet completely melted away. We told her that they were tranquilizers that could help control the bad spill, and only one was lethal. We instructed her to take one a day.

Izumi took all five pills that same day. Being the smart girl that she was, she had already figured it out. She was probably afraid that her leaking cantus would alter the medicine…

Tears fell down my cheeks.

I wasn't sure why. Even though I had never met Izumi in my life, I empathized with her from the bottom of my heart. But it wasn't just that.

The emotions I felt were so powerful I felt like a small raft being tossed about in a storm. My tears fell unceasingly.

"I understand how you feel," Tomiko said. "It's okay. Cry as much as you need to."

"Why…? Why is it so sad?" I asked.

Tomiko shook her head. "I can't answer that yet. But when confronting our grief, we need to give ourselves time to mourn so that we can accept and overcome it. You need a chance to shed your tears."

"Does this have anything to do with the memories you've erased from our minds?"

"Yes, that's right."

I thought of the faceless boy.

"Please restore my memories."

"I can't do that." Tomiko smiled sadly. "It wasn't just your memories. Every recorded instance of that boy has been erased, down to Maria Akizuki's diary entries. The incident was just too shockingly visceral; we're afraid that any memory of it would be traumatic enough to destabilize the minds of the townspeople and create a domino-effect leading to further tragedies…"

A flicker of darkness passed over her face. "You may be able to endure it. But if I restored your memories, you wouldn't be able to keep it a secret from your friends. In the end, everyone would find out."

"…but-"

"Please think about what I've told you. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. We must give the most care and attention to the weakest ones."

"The weakest ones…?"

Tomiko stroked my hair sympathetically. "I wasn't joking earlier when I said I wanted you to succeed me. If that time comes, all your lost memories will be returned to you."

"I could never take your place."

No matter what the personality index said, I knew that I wasn't strong enough.

"I understand what you're saying. I used to feel the same, but the time will come when you will have to do what needs to be done. It is a task only you can do. Do you understand? Remember what we must do in order to stop fiends and karma demons from appearing again."

Tomiko's words echoed heavily in my chest.

3

Mamoru ran away from home on a cold day in the middle of February.

When his father went to wake him up after lighting the kilns in the morning, nothing seemed amiss. But when Mamoru didn't come down for breakfast, he went to check up on him again and found the room empty.

There was a note on left on his desk that simply said, "Please don't look for me." This was the message most often left behind by people who have run away, and also the most ridiculous.

"What should we do?" Maria said tearfully, her breath a white puff in the air. Her hat was covered with snow and even her eyelashes had tiny icicles on them.

Maria and Mamoru lived on opposite sides of town, but I knew that they met up everyday to go to school together. Today, she had gotten tired of waiting and gone to his house. When she heard the story from Mamoru's flustered father, she made him promise not to tell anyone and came straight to me.

"Isn't it obvious? We look for him."

I had already untied my canoe from the dock. If Maria had arrived any later, we would have missed each other.

"Let's go get Satoru and start following Mamoru's tracks."

"But wouldn't it be suspicious if everyone from team one suddenly skipped school?"

Although Ryou was technically in our group, he usually spent all his time with the members of group two. Maria was right. If we all failed to show up, it would raise too many questions and we would be brought in for questioning.

"Alright. Let's go to school for now. We have independent observation time during third and fourth period, right? We'll sneak out then."

Since it was Saturday, we only had classes in the morning.

"But we'll never be able to make it back before homeroom."

"Let's think of an excuse later. Good thing we'll have the genius bullshitter with us. In any case, we can't look for Mamoru any earlier than that."

It was initially predicted that this winter would be rather mild, but at the end of January, a cold front came rolling in from the mainland and temperatures dropped to record lows. It had snowed so

much the previous night that the town was covered in a thick blanket of it. I had no idea where Mamoru could have run off to, but packed my skis into my canoe just in case.

I arrived at Sage Academy just before class started and managed to slide into my seat without the Sun Prince noticing. He also didn't seem to suspect anything when Maria said that Mamoru was home sick with the cold.

The topic of class for first period was "Society and Logic." It was mind-numbingly boring. We tried our best to hide our impatience and prayed for time to pass quickly. The instant the chime sounded to end the class, Maria and I cornered Satoru and told him everything.

Second period was math, which always gave me a headache. Now there were at least three more irritated students in the class.

And finally it was the long-awaited independent observation period where we were allowed to go off campus if necessary. As the three of us hurried out of the classroom, we ran into our first obstacle.

"Hey, where are you all going?" Ryou said to Satoru, avoiding my eyes.

"Isn't it free observation time right now?" Satoru shrugged.

"That's why I'm asking where you're going. We're in the same team, you know."

"Don't you usually hang out with team two?" Maria said impatiently.

"But I'm still in team one. And anyway, I used to hang out with you guys a long time ago. I don't know why we don't anymore…" Ryou seemed a little confused by the inconsistency in his thoughts.

"Alright, alright. Sorry, we haven't explained it to you yet," Satoru clapped him on the back in a friendly way.

There was no intimacy in that gesture, and it was hard to believe they had ever been lovers.

"We already decided on our observation topic earlier, but you weren't around to hear it. We're going to be observing the pattern of ice crystals in snowflakes."

"Snowflakes? Why? That's kid stuff. I did it one winter break when I was in Friendship School."

Although Ryou had been friends with us since we were little, he didn't go to Harmony School with Satoru and me. Instead, he was with Mamoru at Friendship School.

"We're observing the changes they undergo when we use cantus on them. We've already divided up the work. Could you go look behind the school?"

"What exactly are we observing?"

"First, look at the snowflakes through a magnifying glass and sketch their pattern. You need at least a hundred to start. Then divide them into broad categories by shape. Lastly, choose a few patterns and try to copy them onto another patch of snow."

"But can snowflakes change their shape once they've already formed?" Ryou asked doubtfully.

"Exactly! That's the whole point of our observation," Satoru replied quickly. "Most solid things are some kind of crystal, right? So if we can change the shape of a water crystal without melting it, it might be possible to change other things a lot more freely than we can now."

"Hmm…" Ryou said contemplatively.

He seemed to have no immunity against Satoru's made-up stories and swallowed the explanation hook, line, and sinker. There was no way he had ever been close friends with us.

"I see. So you want me to check behind the school?"

"Yeah, please. We'll be looking in the front. Oh, also, once you start the observation, you can't stop in the middle. If you do, you'll have to start all over."

"Alright," he said, and left.

"You're so evil," I complimented him from the bottom of my heart.

"What? It was the best solution."

We walked boldly out of the school and to the dock. The wind stung the parts of my ears that weren't covered by my hat, and it was snowing slightly.

Satoru had to go home and get some tools. Maria and I took Hakuren 4 to Mamoru's house. The air was colder than the water in the canal, so wisps of steam hovered around us. There were sheets of ice in some places that we had to break through with our cantus, and they knocked against the canoe as we passed. I felt like we were steering an icebreaker through the Arctic Ocean.

"Do you have any ideas why Mamoru ran away?" I asked.

Maria thought for a moment. "I don't know…he just seemed a little depressed recently."

I had gotten that feeling as well.

"Why? Did anything happen?"

"No, nothing serious. I think I was the only one who noticed anything."

"Let's hear it."

"There was an assignment he couldn't really work out. It should've been easy for him. But he's such a pessimist, once he considers the possibility of failing, it's hopeless."

"That's it?"

Did he run away from home because of that?

"No, I think the Sun Prince gave him an earful. …then I joked that they might send a copycat after him, and he went pale as death and took it really seriously."

If that was true, then I was also partly responsible. It had probably been a bad idea to talk about the kids that had disappeared from school.

Maria and Tomiko had been right that Mamoru was much weaker than me.

Suddenly I remembered something that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"A chain is only as strong as its weakest link…"

"What?" she asked a little suspiciously.

I said it was nothing, even as I tried to work out the confused thoughts in my mind. Just now, a frightening thought had flashed through my head, but I couldn't get a good grasp on what exactly it was.

Oakgrove was on the western end of the district. During this season, it was directly in the path of the winds coming off the river, so it was unbearably cold. When we arrived, the frigid air had already completely numbed my face.

I tied Hakuren 4 to a post, hoisted my backpack, and put on my skis, which looked like a combination of traditional round snowshoes and Telemark skis.

On the underside of the skis were thin, angled spikes that helped you brake when you pushed your foot back, making it possible to walk on flat ground. You could also skate by spreading your legs shoulder-width, bending forward, and propelling yourself with your cantus. It was easy to go uphill this way as you could go as fast as you wanted. When going downhill, you simply used them like normal skis.

Maria wore normal shoes and hovered in the air like a ghost.

When we arrived, we went around Mamoru's house looking for footprints. At least now having snow everywhere was helpful.

"Hey, is this it?"

I hadn't found footprints, but sled tracks. Judging from their width, they appeared to be a child's sled.

"Mamoru was never great with skis. He hardly ever used them, in fact."

"It looks like he dug out the sled he used in Friendship School. Look at how deep the tracks are. He must have brought luggage."

Running away on a kid sled piled with luggage wasn't a smart plan, but it seemed like something Mamoru would do.

After a while, I saw Satoru's canoe coming toward us at breakneck speed.

"Sorry for making you wait. Which way are we going?"

He was already decked out in trekking gear. His skis were wider than mine, which meant they required more strength to use, but also meant he could walk on still water like a water strider.

We started along the sled tracks. Even though Mamoru had over three hour's head start, he couldn't have gone too far because his laden sled shouldn't be able to go very quickly without losing balance. And if he stopped to figure out where he was going, maybe he would only have two hours on us.

The tracks started from behind the house and ran straight for a while before turning right and up a small hill.

"It looked like he was trying to find a path people don't usually use," Satoru said.

"But he didn't even bother to erase his tracks. That's just like him," Maria replied from above us.

"Why didn't he use a canoe?" I asked.

I had been wondering about this since the beginning. A canoe would have been more familiar to use, faster, and could fit his luggage much more easily.

"He didn't want to be seen?"

I guess that was the biggest reason. But it might also mean something else. It was easier to go by the canals, but that meant it would also be easier to pursue him. Perhaps Mamoru wanted to go past the Holy Barrier and into the mountains.

The snow that had stopped for about an hour started falling lightly again. We hurried after the tracks. Satoru and I skied on either side of the sled tracks while Maria followed behind us, jumping lightly every forty or fifty meters. It was easier to do this than levitate continually.

"Wait!" Maria shouted.

We stopped.

"What?" I retraced my steps slowly.

Maria stood four or five meters away from the tracks, staring at the snow.

"Look. What do you make of this?" she pointed at a set of footprints.

It was the right length, but too narrow to be a print left by a human, bear, or monkey. If I had to guess I would say that it looked like a rabbit's track. But it was too long, and there was only one print, whereas rabbits jumped with both feet at the same time. These tracks alternated left and right like human steps.

"It might be queerats…" Satoru sounded out of breath as he peeked over my shoulder.

"What would they be doing here?"

"How should I know? Maybe they're hunting?"

"Hunting?" I got an unpleasant feeling in my chest as I looked back at the footprints. "That's not good."

"Why?"

"Look carefully. They're parallel to the sled tracks the whole way, right?"

No matter how I looked at it, I couldn't shake the idea that they were following Mamoru.

The two sets of tracks led us farther and farther out into the middle of nowhere. It was difficult to make out tracks over the layer of fresh snow. Eventually, we approached the bottom of a steep slope, more a hill than a snowdrift.

"That's an impressive slope to take on with a children's sled," Satoru said, sounding amazed.

"Never expected a guy like him to be so fearless."

Or, if he were being chased by something even scarier, he might go up the hill without a second thought.

We followed the sled tracks up, but the wind had blown all the powdered snow off the face of the hill, leaving only packed, frozen snow that made our skis slide sideways and almost made us fall over. If it weren't for having cantus, I'd have fallen head over heels to the bottom of the hill in an instant.

The slope arced endlessly before us. The valley below grew deeper. It seemed like Mamoru wanted to keep climbing, but the trees growing halfway up the hill blocked his way. If he had continued, he would have run into the rocks jutting out of the snow higher up. Having gone as far as he could go, he would have had no choice but to turn back, but even with the help of his cantus, steering a heavy sled down a steep hill was a challenge. Mamoru was trapped in a sticky situation. He could only keep going.

"Hey, I can't see the sled tracks anymore. Can you?" I stopped and shouted to them.

Satoru shook his head. "No. Even though the sled was heavy enough to leave tracks in the ice up til now…"

"I'll go higher to look," Maria said and leapt up into the air, rising like a balloon.

"You can still faintly see the tracks leading up to here," I traced the lines in the ice, doing my best not to slip and fall down the hill.

I felt a strange texture against my fingertips. Stone. Since most of it was still covered, it was hard to tell that there was a flat expanse of rock about the size of three tatami underneath the ice.

I cleared area with my cantus and saw a thin metallic line scratched into the stone.

"Satoru, look!"

He turned deftly and stopped beside me.

"Maybe this was made by the sled…!"

Maria descended toward us. "I can't see any tracks from up there. And there's probably no use climbing higher either."

"Maria! This is bad!"

As she listened to my explanation, her face, white from the cold, began to flush. "So you mean Mamoru slipped and…all the way to the bottom?"

We all looked down into the valley. Somehow, we had managed to come so far that the bottom was now over a hundred meters below us. A fall from this height was most likely fatal, no matter how skilled you were at cantus.

"Anyway, let's go down a little and look. Even if he did fall, it doesn't mean he went all the way to the bottom."

At Satoru's words, we descended the slope.

Thirty, forty meters down, the ground suddenly felt different beneath our feet.

"A snowdrift!"

There was a hollow in the ground and soft snow had piled into it.

"Looks like there's still hope. It could have acted as a cushion and stopped the sled."

"But there aren't any tracks continuing from here," Maria said, and started swiping frantically at the snow with her cantus as if she had lost all control.

"Careful. It's tricky for you to multitask with your cantus, let me do it," I said, stopping her.

With one gust, I sent the snow flying up around us. Satoru backed away from the flurries whipping into the air.

Although I had grandly offered to help Maria, the truth was that it was difficult, almost reckless of me to be standing on the slippery slope without the aid of my cantus. After a few seconds, I really needed to use my cantus to support myself again.

Just then, Maria shouted, and I stopped the wind.

"There! Buried over there!" she shrieked.

She was pointing at the metal runners of the sled sticking out of the snow.

"I'll dig it out! Don't do anything."

Satoru visualized a giant scoop and started shoveling large amounts of snow and dumping it down the cliff. When the sled was mostly uncovered, we switched to digging with our hands. When all the annoying snow was cleared away, we turned the sled right side up, scattering the luggage that had been piled on it. But Mamoru was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is he?" Maria asked half-hysterically. "If he's not here, then did he fall all the way down? We have to go help him!"

I stayed silent, not knowing how to respond. If Mamoru had time to use his cantus, he would have broken his fall here. If he had continued falling from here, he must have been unconscious the whole way down. In that case there was only a slim chance of survival.

"No, wait…" Satoru said calmly. "Don't you think it's weird? Why was the sled buried so perfectly?"

At his tone of voice, a spark of hope kindled inside me.

"Because the snow covered it?" I said.

He shook his head slowly. "It hasn't been snowing that much. If it did, we wouldn't have been able to follow his tracks this far."

"Then the impact of the falling sled must have driven it into the snowdrift."

"Even if that had happened, the snow wouldn't have covered it so completely."

"What are you guys talking about? Mamoru isn't here. Who gives a damn what happened to the sled!"

"It's important. …it means he might be okay," Satoru said.

We fell silent at his words.

"Really?" "Why?" Maria and I asked simultaneously.

"I can only think of one reason the sled was buried here," he said contemplatively. "It was done on purpose so no one would find it."

"Mamoru hid it?" Maria asked, sounding hopeful.

"Or the queerats that were chasing him…"

Where would the queerats have taken him after burying the sled? I tried to look for a possible route they could have gone by.

After walking parallel to the slope for a while, I went up a gentle incline and through some bushes. There I discovered a small path running to the top of the slope.

"It looks like an animal trail."

But there were queerat footprints on the path, along with what looked like something heavy that had been dragged along.

"What did they do to Mamoru…" Maria trailed off, as if imagining the worst.

"I think he lost consciousness and the queerats brought him with them in order to help him," Satoru said.

"How can you tell?" I asked.

He pointed at the ground, "Look, they were avoiding the tree roots. If they had been carrying a dead body, they wouldn't have been worried about him hitting the roots."

Even though that explanation was not entirely convincing, it gave us a bit of encouragement.

After following the path all the way up, the footsteps suddenly vanished. After some searching, we discovered what appeared to be the remains of tracks that had been carefully smoothed over.

Twenty meters later, the footprints, as well as the marks of whatever was being dragged, reappeared. I felt that we were nearing our goal and grew a little nervous.

The tracks continued about a hundred meters into a sparse forest.

"Hey, that…!" Satoru pointed ahead.

Although it was hidden in shadow, I could see a wall of snow built up between two thick pine trees.

We crept closer and saw it was a dome-shaped structure about two meters tall.

"It's a snow hut!" Maria suppressed a shout.

It was a snow hut like the ones we had built as kids. From the footprints on its surface, it had probably been built in the same way–first by packing the snow into a solid dome, then digging out the inside. With the pine trees supporting it on either side, it looked more durable than the ones we usually made.

"What do we do?" Satoru asked nervously.

"Let's go in from the front."

There was no time to discuss this. I approached the hut decisively. Maria and Satoru automatically spread out on either side of me. I didn't think that the queerats would attack humans, but in this formation we could easily back each other up as well as avoid being attacked all at the same time.

"Is anyone there?" I asked, standing in front of the hut.

No answer. I went around to the back and saw a small opening like those you see in tearooms. It was covered by a screen made of twigs tied together.

I peeked in through the screen.

"Satoru! Maria! He's here!" I shouted.

They rushed over and looked into the hut.

The interior was rather large. Mamoru lay in the middle, wrapped in a woolen blanket. It was hard to see his face, but his hair was unmistakable. His chest rose and fell slightly and he appeared to be asleep.

"I'm so relieved…" Maria covered her face and started to cry.

Mamoru's eyes slowly opened. "Hey. You guys came."

"Don't give me that. We were worried sick," Satoru said sharply, but he couldn't help smiling.

"What in the world happened? Did you really fall down the cliff? I asked.

Mamoru knitted his brows, looking like he was trying hard to remember.

"I see. So I did fall. I can't really remember what happened. Every time I try, my mind gets all hazy like I have a concussion. I also hurt my leg and couldn't walk, so Squonk had to dig me out of the snow and bring me here."

"Who?" Maria asked, still smiling tearily.

"Squonk. Though I don't know how to actually pronounce his name. …oh yeah, you've all met him a long time ago."

"We did? When?"

There was a rustling sound behind us as the screen was pulled aside.

Startled, we turned and saw a queerat carrying a bunch of packages on his back. He seemed extremely surprised to see us.

Satoru picked up the queerat with his cantus and he dropped the packages, squealing in fright. He was wrapped in layers of clothing, including a papery thermal garment that rustled as he moved. On top of it all was a thin, dirty cape that looked incredibly familiar.

"Could he be from that time…"

"You know him?" Maria sounded surprised.

"Yeah, you were all there too. Remember how right after I entered Sage Academy, we rescued a couple queerats that fell into the canal?"

Slowly, the full memory returned to me. If I'm not mistaken, he should have the "Goat" character tattooed on its forehead… Satoru and Maria appeared to remember too.

"Put him down. Squonk saved my life," Mamoru said.

Satoru lowered him to the ground.

"Kikikikiki… Gods. Thak you," he bowed low to us.

"No, we should be thanking you for saving Mamoru."

"It is nothing. Kakakakakak…ka, a god was in trouble, naturally I psssssh…should help."

Squonk's speech was punctuated with squeaks and grunts and difficult to understand compared to Squealer and Kiroumaru. But it was a great improvement from when we had rescued him from the canal.

"I'm grateful for your help, Squonk, but why were you following Mamoru?" Satoru sounded almost accusatory.

"I happened to be passing by and saw the tracks in the snow. I wondered if they belonged to some other grrrr…colony. Shhhhh..so I decided to go look," Squonk said with some difficulty, drooling as he talked.

"Hm, but why were you there in the first place?" I asked

Maria interrupted before he could answer. "Does it matter? He saved Mamoru. Why are you two complaining?"

"I'm not," I said hurriedly.

If I had pressed Squonk more at that time, maybe the outcome would have been different. But given the fact that the queerats were so good at lying that even Satoru paled in comparison, I don't think the conclusion would have changed much.

Still, I think it would have been a good idea to ask why Squonk was inside the Holy Barrier. At the time, we were strictly forbidden from going outside the Holy Barrier. If I had known that the queerats could travel freely in and out, it would have heightened my sense of danger.

Later, when I learned the reason they could enter and leave the barrier without consequence, what surprised me was that despite having culture, queerats were still considered wild animals.

"More importantly, Mamoru, explain yourself," Maria turned on him.

"Um…sorry."

"'Sorry' isn't an explanation. Why did you go off on your own?"

He sat up, looking like he was about to cry. "Because…I had no choice. I didn't want to die!"

"What do you mean?" Maria frowned.

"I'm different from you guys. My cantus is fairly weak, and I have no real talents. I felt left behind."

"That's not true," I said, but he ignored me.

"The Sun Prince has these cold eyes when he looks at me too. I'm already on the list of people to be disposed of. Like X, or the girl who used to be in our team. Like Saki's sister."

I looked accusingly at Maria.

"I didn't tell him," she said hurriedly.

"I know. You guys have been keeping secrets from me. Like the mirror. You didn't want me to hear about it, right?"

"You were eavesdropping?" I asked. Everyone ignored me.

"…being disposed, the list, you're thinking too much. It's not going to happen," Maria said soothingly.

"A copycat came."

Everyone went silent at his words.

"Huh? What are you talking about? I mean…" Maria trailed off, seeing the look on Mamoru's face.

"I saw it twice. The first was four days ago at night. I was coming home after dark and felt something tailing me. I went around a corner where there was a brazier then turned around quickly."

"Was it there?" Satoru whispered.

"I didn't see the actual thing. But I knew something was hiding around the corner. …the fire cast its shadow on the road. It wasn't clear, but it was the shape of something huge."

We swallowed, hanging on to his every word.

"I panicked and sparked the brazier. There was a blinding fireball and all the wood was burned up in an instant. But the shadow already disappeared. I ran all the way home in the dark."

"…but are you sure you didn't just imagine it?" Maria tried to soften her words with a smile.

"Yeah, if it really was a tainted…a copycat, it would have attacked you," I agreed.

"No, I'm not so sure of that." In one sentence, Satoru ruined our efforts to comfort Mamoru. "There are a lot of tales about copycats, but there's one disturbing detail they all share. They practice tailing you first before they attack."

Mamoru nodded, "I didn't feel that it was going to attack me then. …but yesterday it was different."

"Yesterday? You don't mean…" Maria seemed to remember something.

"Yesterday after school. I was the only one who stayed behind for supplementary classes. When I was about to leave, the Sun Prince asked me to put some leftover printouts away in the storage room…"

"The one in the hallway leading to the inner yard?"

I felt a chill that had nothing to do with the weather.

"Yeah. So I did. There weren't that many; I think he was just looking for an excuse. I went inside the room, and when I was walking back, I felt something behind me." Tears began to fall from his face. "There aren't any windows there, so it was pitch black. I started walking faster. I knew I couldn't look behind me. I knew that if I did, it would be the end. Then I heard it. Footsteps. They were almost silent, but the floor vibrated from their weight," he sobbed. "When I stopped, so did the footsteps. I was too scared to move, then I heard what sounded like an animal breathing. It smelled like it too. I thought I was done for. I was going to be killed by a copycat. Then I think my cantus burst out of me unconsciously. The air gusted like a tornado and I heard a terrible cry behind me. I turned around…and saw it."

"What was it?" Satoru leaned forward in anticipation.

"I only caught a glimpse of it before it melted away into the shadows. It was an unbelievably huge, white cat. There were bloodstains on the floor. It might have been hurt by the tornado."

We were silent.

"Yesterday, I wanted to wait for Mamoru to finish his supplementary classes, but the Sun Prince told me to go home because it would take too long." Anger flared in Maria's eyes. "They were planning to isolate and kill him right from the start…"

"Wait. Why do they want to get rid of Mamoru? His cantus is average, and there's nothing wrong with his personality. He's quiet and cooperative…"

"How would I know? He saw a copycat. Twice! How can you still doubt him?"

As Satoru and Maria argued, a prickling unease began to grow in my mind.

Based on the stories Tomiko told me, there wasn't anything strange about wanting to eliminate Mamoru. When he was being stalked by the tainted cats, he had used his cantus in a dangerous way toward an unseen attacker. It showed that he might be reckless enough to attack other people if he were frightened. This involuntary confession posed another issue. His cantus couldn't be properly controlled on a conscious level, which meant that he was at risk for becoming a karma demon in the future…

It scared me that I had unconsciously been thinking about it from the Board of Education's point of view.

"I remembered something when I saw the copycat," Mamoru said quietly. "I'd seen it before."

"What are you talking about?" Satoru asked dumbly.

"I can't remember clearly, the memory might have been erased…but I was hiding behind a storeroom in the inner courtyard. When the storeroom opened, a copycat came out."

"I remember that!" Maria shouted. "I…was there too."

There was a heavy silence.

Our naive plan to find Mamoru and bring him back was crushed. What would we do now? We were at a loss.

Since Mamoru's leg might be broken, it would be impossible to bring him back right away even if we'd wanted to. So Satoru went back alone to tell the Sun Prince that Maria and I had caught a cold and gone home early.

Maria and I built another snow hut next to Mamoru's. I had brought a sleeping bag just in case, but Maria didn't have anything so we went to dig out Mamoru's sled.

Luckily, Mamoru had more than enough food and daily necessities, so we brought them back on the sled and built a cook fire. We melted snow for water and made dinner for the three of us. Squonk shared some of our dried meat.

"It looks it'll be clear tomorrow," I said, sipping tea.

"Guess so," Maria said, a little curtly.

"If the weather holds, Mamoru can ride the sled."

"Ride it where?"

"Well…" I stopped.

"I'm not going back." Mamoru raised his head.

"But-"

"I'll be killed."

"He's right! He was almost killed once already," Maria said.

"But realistically, there's nothing else he can do but go back, right?" I tried to persuade them. "I talked with the head of the Ethics Committee, Tomiko. If we tell her…I'm sure she'll understand."

Actually I had absolutely no confidence in anything I just said. Tomiko might decide that Mamoru was indeed a danger to the town, and even if she didn't, I doubted she would overrule the Board of Education's decision just to save him.

"No, we can't trust anyone in the town," Maria said, point-blank. "You may be right that the Ethics Committee isn't the one making the decision to eliminate students. But they go along with it. If they didn't, people wouldn't disappear. Like your sister, or the girl in our team, or X."

I thought about the faceless boy. What would he say in this situation?

"So what will he do if he can't go back?"

Mamoru answered, "Survive on my own."

"What? This isn't like going to camp, you know? You'll have to spend the next few decades by yourself…"

"I don't like it either. But I'll manage somehow with my cantus."

"Somehow…"

"I think we'll manage." Once again, Maria came to his rescue. "With enough practice, a person can survive alone. But he won't be alone. I'll be with him."

"You can't be serious!"

My head spun.

"Mamoru can't do it alone. Plus, we chose each other as partners."

Surprisingly, Mamoru disagreed. "No, you have to go back. Your parents will worry."

"Why? Don't you want to be with me?"

"Of course I do. I'm really, really happy. But living away from the town will be difficult. I don't have a choice since I won't be allowed to live if I go back. But you can…"

"Don't worry about that," she smiled gently. "So that's why you ran away without telling me. There's really no one as kind as you are. But it'll be the two of us from now on. Okay? Promise."

Mamoru didn't speak, but tears welled up in his eyes.

I sighed deeply. There was nothing I could say to change their minds.

That night, Maria and I made love in the snow hut.

"I won't be able to meet you again, will I?" I asked petulantly, with my head between her breasts.

"No, we'll definitely meet again," she smiled as she stroked my hair. "I love you, Saki, from the bottom of my heart. But right now I'm worried about Mamoru. There's no one else who will protect him."

"I know, but…"

"What?"

"I'm jealous."

"Silly," she laughed. "From now on, Mamoru and I have to fight to survive the harsh elements of nature. I should be jealous of you."

"You're right. I'm sorry," I apologized meekly.

"You're forgiven," she said, tilting my chin up and kissing me lightly.

We kissed each other deeply and passionately, like we never wanted be parted again.

That was the last time Maria and I kissed.

4

The next morning, I returned to the village alone as a light dusting of snow fell from the sky.

Even though I used my cantus to propel the skis, I had to travel such a long distance that my legs were weak with fatigue. Thoughts of what Maria and Mamoru would do next, as well as all the unknown threats in their future weighed heavily on my mind.

I finally arrived at the dock in Oakgrove and found the place deserted. Even on Sundays there were usually a couple of people hanging around, but I thought nothing of it and simply felt lucky that there was no one to see me.

I untied Hakuren 4 and headed for home. I had used so much of my cantus to get here that I could no longer concentrate fully and my eyes were bleary with tiredness. The canoe drifted from side to side and bumped into the edges of the canal.

Even as I left Oakgrove and made my way back to Waterwheel, I didn't come across a single person.

I finally began to feel that things were not quite right.

Nothing moved along the banks. It was as if Kamisu 66 had been completely abandoned.

The gentle drift of snow became hard, wet flurries. It piled on the prow of the canoe.

I was shocked when my house finally came into view. My parents were standing together by the dock, without even an umbrella to keep off the snow, which had piled up on shoulders and heads.

"Sorry," I said to them as I turned to dock the canoe. "I couldn't come home yesterday…"

They smiled faintly at me.

Finally, my mother spoke. "Are you hungry?"

I shook my head.

"I know you must be tired, but the Board of Education asked for you. Come with me," my father said gravely.

"Can't you let her rest for a bit?" my mother pleaded.

"No…I can't. It's an emergency, especially since they've asked you to come on such short notice."

"It's okay, I'm not that tired," I tried to sound energetic.

"Alright, let's go in dad's canoe. Saki, you can rest for a bit until we get there."

My father's canoe, the one he used outside of work, was twice the size of Hakuren 4.

My mother wrapped a blanket around my shoulders and I closed my eyes, but my heart was thumping too quickly for me to fall asleep.

There was someone waiting for us when we arrived in Hayring. It was the same middle-aged lady who had greeted us after we came back from summer camp two years ago, but this time she didn't meet my eye.

I followed my parents onto the snowy street.

The office of the Board of Education was next to the library where my mother worked. It was surrounded by a wall of bamboo that prevented you from seeing the inside.

We entered through a side door, and although it was still snowing, the courtyard had been cleared and kept dry with cantus. The path was paved with stepping-stones and it was about thirty meters to the entrance hall.

Inside, a narrow hallway stretched on indefinitely. Although the outside of it was quite different, the inside was similar to the Ethics Committee's building.

"Only your daughter may proceed from here," the middle-aged lady said to my parents.

"As her father, and as the mayor, I'd like to represent her on her behalf. I've brought a petition."

"You are not allowed to accompany her," she ignored my father's words.

"As the person entrusted to manage the town's library, I must do my duty to record this event. Will you make an exception?"

"I'm very sorry, but there are no exceptions."

My mother tried to use her position as leverage, but this too was met with stubborn refusal. The two of them were defeated.

"Saki, I don't think I have to tell you, but please answer all questions as truthfully as you can," my mother put her hands on my shoulders and looked earnestly into my eyes.

"I know…it'll be okay," I answered.

I understood what she really meant. Choose the truth carefully. From here on out, a wrong answer could mean death.

I was taken into a large western-styled room with a dark, shining wooden floor. The windows were small and high on the wall, giving everything a classic Rembrandt look. In the center was a table like those used at banquets, and about ten people stood on one side. The head of the Board of Education, Hiromi Torigai, stood in the center. The people on either side must also be members of the committee.

"Saki Watanabe? Please sit over there."

It wasn't Hiromi who spoke, but a large woman on her left. Obediently, I sat down in the only chair available.

"I am the vice-chairman of the Board of Education, Masayo Komatsuzaki. There are a few things I would like to ask you. Please answer all questions truthfully. Do not lie or withhold information. Do you understand?"

Her tone was as kind as any schoolteacher's, but her eyes stared stonily at me. I felt the pressure of her authority and answered, "yes" without any unnecessary words.

"You learned that a boy in your team, Mamoru Itou, had run away from home yesterday in the early hours of the morning. Is this correct?"

"Yes," I said faintly.

"When did you learn about it?"

I knew it was pointless to hide it, so I answered honestly, "Before school."

"How did you know about it?"

"Maria Akizuki told me."

"And what did you do after finding out?"

"We went to school first, and later looked for him when we had the chance."

"Why did you not inform your parents or your teachers?"

This was a good point. I thought for a moment.

"Because we hoped to bring him back before it became a bigger issue."

"I see. But it could be construed as an attempt to hide it from us. You disagreed with the Board of Education's decision and acted out against it, right? On those grounds, you…"

Hiromi whispered something in Masayo's ear. She answered, "I understand."

"…on to the next question. You went searching for Mamoru Itou during independent observation period. Who went with you?"

"Maria Akizuki and Satoru Asahina."

"I see. So the three of you went looking for Mamoru Itou. Did you find him?"

I was confused. Satoru had come back the day before and should have been questioned already. What had he said?

"What's wrong? It might be your first time here, but this is an official court of inquiry. You must tell the truth."

Masayo's voice was severe and a wave of uncertainty went through the room. Hiromi spoke.

"Satoru Asahina has already testified that you found Mamoru Itou. That Mamoru had fallen off his sled and hurt his leg. He said he left you and Maria to nurse him and came back first."

Satoru hadn't mentioned the queerat.

"Chairman…" Masayo looked disapprovingly at Hiromi.

"It's fine. This court was formed to establish the truth. Trying to trick her into contradicting herself is not the goal." She continued so quietly that it was hard to hear. "So, was Satoru Asahina telling the truth?"

"…yes."

I felt slightly relieved realizing that Hiromi was not as hard-hearted as I had thought.

"Then what happened after? Why were you the only one to return? We were expecting you and Maria Akizuki to bring Mamoru Itou back safely," Masayo said.

I looked over the faces of the assembled committee members. How was I supposed to dispel their suspicions? A lie might make everything worse. There was nothing to do but tell just enough of the truth to prevent any inconsistencies.

"I tried to persuade Mamoru to come back with us. But he refused. So I had no choice but to come back alone. Since we couldn't leave him alone, Maria stayed too."

"So Maria Akizuki is still trying to convince Mamoru Itou?"

"Yes."

I glanced away when I answered.

"So what did you plan to do once you came back? Were you going to come clean to your parents, your teacher, and the Board of Education?"

"I…don't know."

"You don't know? What did you…?"

As Masayo grew visibly angry, Hiromi cut in.

"It's reasonable that you were confused. Anyone would be at a loss in this situation. …but you know what to do now, right? All you have to do is answer questions honestly. Leave everything else to us. Okay?"

"I understand."

"But why did Mamoru Itou refuse to return? Did you ask him?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"What was his reason?"

I took a deep breath. Surprisingly, I was calmer than I thought I would be. I couldn't answer this question with a complete lie. If I fudged the details of Mamoru's story and left out the tainted cats, maybe…

"What's wrong? Answer the question!"

I hesitated.

"Do you know what is happening in Kamisu 66 right now?" Masayo shouted. "An order to remain indoors has been enacted and the people tremble with fear. All because of the selfish actions of one student!"

Why was there such an overreaction to a missing student? At the time, I simply couldn't understand it. Instead, an irrepressible anger boiled out of me.

How dare they call Mamoru selfish. The Board of Education was the one who had driven him nearly insane and even tried to kill him.

My silence seemed to arouse suspicion and the people at the table began to stir.

"What's the matter? Why do you remain silent? Say something," Masayo drummed on the table impatiently with her fingers.

"I believe Mamoru ran away because he didn't want to die."

I finally said it. There was no going back now.

"What…don't say something so absurd."

"I'm just answering your question."

Was I really this brave? Even I was surprised by my response.

"I heard this directly from him. Recently, he had been approached by two copy…tainted cats. The first time, it appeared to only tail him."

"Stop! Do you have any idea what you're saying?"

"The second time was after school two days ago. The Sun Pr…Mr. Endou kept Mamoru after school and sent him to the inner courtyard in a deliberate attempt to isolate him," I continued, ignoring her. "There, Mamoru was almost killed by a tainted cat. He saw it clearly. He even said that it had white fur. So he…"

"Enough! Quiet! You have made a farce of the Board of Education and this hearing! Your actions constitute a grave violation of the Code of Ethics!" Masayo shouted hysterically to the entire room.

"I am very disappointed as well. Your parents are both splendid people. I'm sure they will regret that it has come to this," Hiromi sighed.

Although her voice was still soft, I began to feel afraid of her for the first time.

"Are they in a different room? …yes, I understand," she spoke quietly with one of the committee members, then turned toward me again. "Please leave the room. But you will not be allowed to return home with your parents. You will stay in this building…I truly regret that this is the conclusion we have come to."

That was as good as a death sentence.

"Will I be disposed of?"

Hiromi looked disgustedly at me. "What a repulsive girl you are. To say such things so calmly," she whispered.

As she stood up, there was a light knock at the door.

"Who is it? The committee is in meeting. Await your time!" Masayo said sharply.

The knocker ignored this and opened the door.

Everyone else froze. I relaxed.

"Perhaps I came at a bad time. But I'm afraid I must speak here."

Wearing a fur shawl over her kimono, Tomiko Asahina smiled charmingly around at the room. "I know you have all worked hard on this, but may I handle Saki's case?"

"Unfortunately, the Board of Education has exclusive jurisdiction over matters pertaining to juveniles. Outside interference would not be wise, even if it is the request of one such as you…" Masayo's voice was so low it was almost silent.

"You're right. My apologies. I never intended to do this, but I'm partly to blame for this."

"Please, Tomiko, let's talk about this elsewhere," Masayo glanced at me as she spoke.

Tomiko ignored her and turned to Hiromi.

"…what do you mean you are partly to blame?" Hiromi asked.

"I've told Saki a number of things. Including the tainted cats."

"That is quite…unprecedented."

I could see Hiromi turn pale even though her face was hidden in shadow.

"Yes, it is. But it is required to rear the person who may be the future leader of our town."

"She will?" Masayo exclaimed.

"So, Hiromi. Please be lenient with Saki."

"It's not that simple, Tomiko. It's not only the boy who is missing, now the girl has disappeared too!" her voice shook.

"I know. It's a serious matter. But isn't it largely the Board of Education's fault?"

"Our…fault?"

The members of the committee stirred.

"Yes. I believe the decision to dispose of Mamoru Itou was rash and unwise to begin with. That plus your inability to successfully bring about the disposal is what caused this whole situation."

"That's…" Hiromi went quiet, her face strained.

"No one here is free from fault. Including me. Perhaps I must take the blame on an even deeper level. After all, I was the one who ordered the experiment to be performed on team one. But now is not the time to dwell on the past. We need to discuss how to proceed from here. Am I wrong?"

The members of the Board of Education, people with even more power than the mayor and head librarian combined, hung their heads like guilty schoolchildren.

"You are absolutely right," Hiromi mumbled.

"I'm glad we're on the same page. So, let me look after Saki. It'll be alright. I will consider everything you have to say."

There was no room for disagreement.

"May I use the hearth in the inner parlor? I would like to talk to Saki."

"Umm, right now, that room is…"

"Well, well. Were you planning on taking her in there?" Tomiko smiled sweetly. "It's okay. Just leave it as it is."

It was a large room about the size of thirty tatami. There was a big hearth in the middle, full of crackling red flames. A steaming pot of water hung from a long hook in the ceiling.

"No need to be so uptight."

Tomiko ladled out some water and warmed a pair of yellow teacups. She swished the water around three times with a tea whisk and poured it into the waste container. She wiped out the cups with a towel, opened a grey container and scooped powdered green tea into the cups. Once again, she used the whisk to quickly mix the water with the tea.

I took the cup from her and sipped slowly.

"No need to follow such formalities. Drink."

I nodded, but it only made me more nervous.

As much as I tried to, I couldn't ignore the three tainted cats sleeping on the other side of the hearth. One had a tortoiseshell pattern, the other two were striped yellow-white, and black-grey. Their eyes were closed contentedly, and every now and then their ears and tails twitched.

The scene was deceptively peaceful; from the other side of the large hearth, it was difficult to tell how big the cats truly were.

"Well, I guess you can't help noticing the cats. But don't worry. They never attack unless ordered to."

"…why are there three of them?" I asked the first question that came to mind.

"They are trained to work in teams of three. It's an offensive strategy called the trinity, based on the elements of heaven, earth, and man."

"All three attack at the same time?"

"Yes. In cases like these, the target is usually unresponsive to hypnotic techniques. But no matter how powerful you are, it's almost impossible to defend three simultaneous attacks," she said, smiling.

"But the Board of Education had already decided beforehand that we were to be disposed of. Wouldn't one cat be enough?"

Even I was surprised that I could discuss this so calmly.

"You most likely don't remember, but you've repelled the cats before. Once, maybe twice."

"I don't remember at all…"

I fidgeted. Every time I was made aware of a missing memory, I got a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Can I ask something else?" I broke the silence after a pause.

"Go ahead."

"Tomiko…Tomiko-sama."

She chuckled, "Tomiko is fine."

"Earlier, you said that you ordered experiments to be performed on team one, right? What did you mean by that?"

"I see you were paying attention."

She turned the teacup slowly in her hand. The white glaze on the clay gave it a beautiful pink glow.

"You all must have realized to some degree that team one is special."

"Well…I guess."

"You are all very special. Most students are regularly hypnotized from a young age so that we can control their minds. They are unable to even think about bad or potentially harmful things. However, we did not, by and large, take the freedom of thought away from you and your friends."

"Why us?"

"Because docile lambs alone cannot protect the town. Leaders must be broad-minded and tolerant. Their convictions must be strong enough to even do dirty work from time to time. To match the changes in the town over the years, the leader needs to be a highly adaptable individual who strives to survive no matter what."

"So I was put into team one for that?"

"Yes," she said simply.

"What about Satoru? Was he chosen because he's your grandson?"

"My grandson…" Tomiko smiled inscrutably. "The name Asahina is just a string of syllables Satoru and I happen to share. Team one was a group of students with special qualities. Having all of you together made things much easier to manage."

She stood up suddenly and went to the other side of the hearth. Crouching next to the orange-striped cat, she rubbed it behind the ears. It purred delightedly.

"But unforeseen incidents kept happening. My biggest regret was having to dispose of the boy we had the greatest hopes for…" She glanced at me then resumed talking normally. "This time too. It would have been impossible for any other children to consider running away from the town and living on their own. They would have been paralyzed with fear at the thought of crossing the Holy

Barrier. But those two are different. Threatened with death at home, they chose instead to live alone in the wilderness."

I was speechless. Somehow, she had seen through everything.

"A very rational decision, if you ask me. It is the result of free thinking. But right now, it threatens the fundamental safety of the towns."

"Is their departure really such a big problem to the towns?" I asked. "I don't believe Maria or Mamoru will ever return. So I don't think they will be a negative influence…"

"You don't see the true nature of the problem," Tomiko said sadly.

"What do you mean?"

She stopped petting the cat.

"Do you know the state of the population in the Japanese archipelago?"

I was confused by the question. "Not really…"

"In the past, it was the first thing taught in geography classes. But now, such basic information is treated as highly confidential. …at present, the population of all nine districts combined is estimated to be between fifty and sixty thousand."

"That many?" I said, surprised.

"In the ancient civilization, this would be a startlingly small number. A thousand years ago, there were over a hundred million people in Japan alone."

I couldn't believe it. "Hundred million" was a unit used to count fish eggs, not humans. For one thing, it would be difficult to secure food for that many people. And if everyone were to live in the most accessible areas, there wouldn't even be room to breathe.

"Did you know? The ancient civilization had something called nuclear weapons. Through fission of radioactive elements, or nuclear fusion of deuterium, one bomb had the power to wipe out an entire city."

"An entire city…?"

I couldn't imagine why on earth anyone needed a weapon like that. Just for argument's sake, even if they wanted to capture Mt. Fuji, destroying the city protecting it would make the victory completely meaningless.

"Managing such a weapon was incredibly stressful. Which country had the most bombs, which country was developing new ones…but perhaps the situation we face now is even worse."

"I don't understand. I mean, those weapons don't exist anymore, right?"

"Correct. Now, the world is filled with something that is potentially far more fearsome."

"What?"

"Humans."

Tomiko tickled the orange-striped cat under its chin and its purr rumbled through the floorboards like thunder.

"Think back to what I told you before. A single fiend could easily kill an entire district. Moreover, unlike nuclear bombs, a fiend slaughters for as long as its body permits. …and as for karma demons, the mental imbalance of one individual could mean the end of life on Earth."

"…but those are special cases, so if we guard against them properly-"

"No, that's not how it works. You are too preoccupied with the processes by which cantus can go out of control. The real problem is that cantus is unlimited energy. Right now, there are fifty to sixty thousand people living on the Japanese archipelago, and you must imagine that each one has the destructive potential of a nuclear weapon. …so when two of these weapons go missing, how would you deal with them?"

The tortoiseshell cat, twice the size of a lion, got up and stretched. It yawned, showing long saber-like teeth. It paid me no attention as it walked lazily away, making the floorboards creak under its weight.

I would be lying if I said Tomiko's words didn't come as a shock to me, as I had never looked at humans that way before. Those in power probably looked at everything from that perspective so as to be prepared for the worst. But at the time, I thought it was simply the paranoid fears of an old woman.

"Bring them back," she said. "If you want them to live, you must bring them back. I will vouch for their safety. If they continue to hide, they will not live long."

"How come?"

"The Board of Education will devote all their attention to their disposal. The nearby queerat colonies would all receive orders to kill them. And that's not all. All the neighboring districts they might come into contact with, like Shiroishi 71 in Tohoku, Tainai 84 in Hokuriku, and Koumi 95 in Chuubu would all receive letters asking for help in their disposal. They all have their own methods of dealing with threats, which they will naturally use to defend themselves."

"That's so cruel!"

"Yes, so bring them back before it happens. I will give you three days. I'll delay the Board of Education for three days. In that time, find them and bring them back even if you have to tie them up and drag them with you. Don't worry, I'm sure you can do it."

I sat up straight and took a deep breath. There was no room for doubt. I had already decided.

"I understand. I'll leave immediately."

"Good luck."

I stood up, bowed and made to leave. My eyes fell upon the black and grey striped cat. Its eyes were narrowed and its tail was waving slightly from side to side. It appeared to be bidding me goodbye, but the look on its face was similar to that of a cat stalking a bird.

"I would have been prey for those cats had you not come, am I right?" I turned from the doorway and looked gratefully at Tomiko.

"I'm not too sure," she smiled faintly.

A new question arose in my mind.

"But why do you hold so much…influence?"

Tomiko didn't answer for a moment. Just when I was starting to regret that I had asked something rude, she stood and came over to me.

"I'll take you to the dock. Afterwards, I'll tell your parents where you've gone."

"Thank you."

We left the Board of Education's office together, like a granddaughter accompanying her grandmother on a walk. It was still snowing slightly, and tiny flakes danced around us. Through the

white fog of my breath, I looked back at the evil building. It was no small miracle that I had made it out of there alive.

"Your question earlier…" Tomiko held her hand up to catch the drifting snow.

Her hands were unexpectedly youthful. There were no wrinkles on her wrist, and no veins showed under the skin. Flakes of snow melted in the palm of her hand.

"I think this is a good chance to tell you about some things."

I swallowed and waited for her to continue.

"It's true that I hold a lot of power in the district. Possibly enough to be a dictator or absolute monarch if I wished."

I didn't think she was bluffing. After all, she had dealt with the fearsome Board of Education like they were children.

"Do you know what the source of power is? You were not taught much about the history of mankind, so the question may be a little difficult. In the past, men used violence, fear, wealth, religious brainwashing, and so forth to obtain power. I didn't use any of that. All I had on my side…was time."

"Time?" I didn't get it.

"Yes. I'm completely unremarkable as far as humans go, but I had a lot of time."

We arrived at the dock. The boat Tomiko prepared for me was already there. When did she give the order for that? It was wedge-shaped, meant for quick travel, and was equipped with skis like the ones I had used a few days ago.

"Saki, what age do I look like to you?"

That was a difficult question. It would be rude if I guessed older than she actually was, but I couldn't come up with a good guess anyway, so I told her the truth.

"About sixty…seven?"

"Good guess, I'm surprised. …you got the last two digits right," she grinned. "I'm 267 years old."

"You can't be," I laughed, thinking it was a joke.

But her expression did not change. "My episode with the fiend when I was a nurse was 245 years ago. And I've been chairman for the Ethics Committee for 170 years."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "B-but, how did you…" I couldn't even finish the question.

"How did I live so long? Why do I look so young? Come now, don't look at me like you've seen a ghost."

I shook my head.

"My grades in cantus usage were always perfectly average. In today's Sage Academy, I might even stumble over some of the second year lessons. But there is one thing I can do that no one else, not even Shisei, can. I can regenerate my telomeres. Do you know what those are?"

"No."

"I see. So even this information is restricted. Telomeres are the parts at the ends of our chromosomes. Every time a cell divides, its telomeres are shortened a little bit because they can't be fully regenerated. Once the telomeres have worn down, the cells lose their ability to replicate and

death is inevitable. So the length of our telomeres dictates the length of our lifespan, like the length of a wick on a candle."

Since my knowledge of biology was limited by the classes I had taken, I couldn't fully understand what Tomiko was saying. But the image she created was clear enough. The nucleus of a cell divides the double helix of its DNA in order to replicate. With time, the ends of the strands of DNA shorten. If it were possible to reset these parts to their original length, eternal life was a real possibility.

"…so even though Satoru is related to me, he's not my grandson," Tomiko said, sounding amused. "I still remember the birth of my first grandson 210 years ago. And that saying that grandchildren are cuter than all other children is completely true. I can't remember them being anything but little angels. But the feeling doesn't really extend to great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren. Satoru is removed from me by nine generations and so has only 1/512th of my genes. That's not to say I don't adore him, but the feeling of being blood relatives isn't really there."

So it's possible that even though Satoru calls Tomiko "grandmother", he doesn't actually feel that it's true. Plus, his two real grandmothers are probably still living, making it even stranger to call her that.

"I'll tell you everything when you return," she said.

Before I left, she said something that sounded like a parting gift. "I'll have a new lesson for you once you return; you must be bored with what you're doing at Sage Academy."

"It's…fixing a vase could come in useful."

"Indeed. But I'll share a little secret with you. The mental image to repair your telomeres is a little like the one needed to fix a broken vase."

Remembering how naive I was back then always makes me break out in a cold sweat. Someone with that sort of knowledge could achieve any goal, or act upon any desire as easily as taking candy from a baby. (I just recently came across that phrase in one of the ancient books and thought it was a terrible metaphor. Did people really do that back then?)

Anyway, I set off with the boat in high spirits. My fourteen year-old body was filled to the brim with the conviction that I would find Maria and Mamoru and bring them home.

Of course, saving my friends was the most important thing, but I couldn't deny that in the back of my mind, I was thrilled to have been the chosen one.

Now that I think about it, since I had been appointed the successor to the current leader, I probably tried to act the part.

At first, spurred on by the excitement of such a promotion, I tried to go as fast as I could. But after a while, the biting wind cooled my head a little.

Traveling alone was dangerous; Mamoru was the prime example of that. If Squonk hadn't rescued him, he'd definitely be dead by now.

I stopped the boat.

I needed a partner. One way or another, I had to find Satoru, but I didn't know where to start. I do know he was questioned by the Board of Education after he came back, and he most likely made it out alright because Tomiko was there.

I regretted leaving in such a hurry. I should have asked Tomiko for permission to bring Satoru with me. I struggled to decide whether I should go back. But something made me hesitate.

Snow fell heavily, flakes melting as they touched the dark surface of the water. The sight reminded me of something.

Tomiko's eyes. They were dark and fathomless, like she had seen all the mysteries of time…

In the end, I decided to turn back. But as I was about to do so, a boat approached me from behind. It was hard to see through the snow, but I immediately recognized the silhouette of the person speeding toward me. He was probably using the same speedboat as me.

"Hey!" he yelled and waved as if trying to confirm the occupant of the boat ahead of him.

It was Satoru.

"Over here!" I waved back.

"Saki! Thank goodness I caught up to you," he gasped. "I was afraid I was going to have to look all over for you in this snow."

"Why? Weren't you questioned by the Board of Education?"

"Yeah, last night, by that awful Hiromi Torigai. It was bad enough the first time, but they called me again today and I was half ready to be killed."

"Good thing your grandmother was there."

Satoru probably didn't know about his true relationship with Tomiko yet.

"Yeah… She really saved me there. But I was stuck waiting in a tiny room all morning. When she finally told me to come out, she immediately told me to go after you. I had no idea what was going on so it really surprised me."

"You know what we need to do?"

"We need to bring Maria and Mamoru back, right?"

That was all he needed to know.

Unlike before, we now knew where Mamoru's snow hut was, so we used the waterways and stopped as close to our destination as possible. We went all the way to the edge of Oakgrove, then traveled two hundred meters over land, skimming through the snow on the boat's skis. We ran over quite a few rocks along the way, and the bottoms of the boats were probably badly scratched, but there was no time to worry about that.

It was a relief when we arrived at the Tone River. We slipped into the water and traveled two kilometers upriver before landing again.

We moored the boats on some rocks to keep them from drifting away. I finally noticed that they had the "God's Eye" seal on the sides, along with a red number and a Sanskrit character. It was the first time I had ever seen the word Ban, the symbol of Vairocana, used. The boats probably belonged to the Ethics Committee, and had undoubtedly never been handled so roughly before.

We unloaded our skis and shouldered our backpacks.

"Let's go."

It was barely past noon, but the sky was slowly filling with clouds, making it look like the sun was about to set soon. It was still snowing, and the cold wind felt like knives on our skin.

As if pulled by an invisible rope, we skied straight up the hill, snow flying out behind us as we went.

5

To be honest, I have absolutely no sense of direction.

Some time ago, when Satoru and I were wandering through the queerat nest, I remember saying that I wasn't good at remembering the twists and turns of the tunnels. It's actually a lot worse than that. The truth is that I wouldn't even be able to get from one place to another in my own town if it weren't for the street signs on the canals.

"…hmm, is this the right direction?"

Unlike me, Satoru has the navigational abilities of a homing pigeon, but since we were following a different path from the previous trip, he often stopped to make sure we were going the right way.

"It's right. I think," I agreed.

It's not like I could actually tell, so I couldn't respond in any other way. But that seemed to annoy Satoru.

"Saki…you're not even really thinking about it, are you?"

"That's not true."

"You sure about that?"

"I told you I thought about it."

Satoru shook his head disbelievingly and continued climbing the hill, grumbling to himself. I followed in his tracks.

I felt pretty optimistic about the situation. I thought that as soon as we arrived at Maria's snow hut, our mission would be half completed. Plus, joining up with Satoru was an accomplishment too.

"Huh? I thought we passed through here before?"

As we crested a snowy peak and left the bamboo forest, a familiar scenery appeared before us.

"Did we get it wrong? We did leave ski tracks in the area last time."

Satoru looked disappointedly at the powdery snow all around us. In just one day, enough snow had piled up to erase our tracks.

"No, it's the right place. I'm positive!"

I was confident, but Satoru said slowly, "Why do you say that?"

"Because I remember it."

"Really? Because you didn't remember anything on the way here."

"Well, that was the path…" I didn't really want to admit that, but I needed to convince him I was confident. "I remember the place. See? Like those trees." I pointed to the rowan trees growing off to the side. "You don't see those around here often, right? That's why I remembered them."

"Are you sure?" he asked doubtfully.

"And that rock too. It looks like a snake coiling around itself. It's easy to recognize."

"Actually it looks more like a pile of shit," Satoru said. But he seemed to believe me anyway. "If this is the place, then we're getting close."

We started along the slope. Even without any trails to follow, I gradually started recognizing my surroundings. Excited to be on the right track, we sped up.

The hill became steeper. We were now much higher up, and the valley on our left looked like in infinite drop. The snow continued to fall and we were forced to slow down as visibility decreased.

"Where's that flat rock? The place where Mamoru's sled fell." Satoru asked.

"I have no idea. I can't see it at all," I answered honestly.

There was nothing memorable on the hill, and the falling snow made everything look different. It wasn't light, powdered snow either, but big wet flakes that stuck to everything.

We stopped.

"It's dangerous to keep going like this. We might end up falling from that rock too," Satoru said as he rubbed his numb fingers together.

"We should be okay if we go slowly."

"That'll take too long. And no matter how slowly we go, if we fall, we fall."

We looked at one another. Each of us hoped that the other had a secret plan, but of course it wasn't that easy. To make things worse, the snow was coming down harder and thicker than before, and the wind was picking up. The bare hill provided no shelter and we suddenly realized how cold it was. Skiing up the hill, though largely cantus-assisted, had kept us warm. But I hadn't eaten since morning, and all the energy I had burned made me lightheaded.

"The important thing is to just avoid the rock, right? Even without taking the exact same route, we'll still be able to find the next part of the path."

I could still clearly remember the animal trail in the bushes higher up on the hill.

"Sure, but how are you going to do that?"

"Make a path with our cantus?"

"I see…yeah. That'll work."

I wonder if our judgment had been impaired by fatigue and anxiety. The plan was just as reckless as Mamoru hauling a child's sled up a steep hill. We cleared a path in front of us using the image of a giant shovel. The path that cut through the snow looked much safer than the slippery road we had been using.

"Alright, let's go."

We went single-file along the narrow path. The cleared path was only about forty or fifty meters, so when we reached the end, we had to stop and remove more snow.

Then, there was an unpleasant creaking sound.

"Shit. An avalanche…!"

We stood, petrified. Come to think of it, we had cleared a horizontal path right in the middle of a steep hill. I'd have been surprised if there wasn't an avalanche.

"A roof!"

"Split it!"

We shouted over each other. A terrifying torrent of snow was rushing toward us with the intent of burying us alive, but was diverted by two invisible wedges right above our heads to either side. The snow fell to the bottom of the valley in a glistening shower.

It was over in less than a minute, but felt like an eternity.

The avalanche stopped before we even realized it. Most of the snow on the hill had fallen off and only small dustings of snow continued to trickle down every now and then.

"Saki, are you okay?"

"Yeah, you?"

"Totally fine."

Both of us had used the image of a gabled roof. Instead of trying to stop the entire mass of the snow coming toward us, diverting its path was a better alternative. Luckily, our cantus did not touch, and the two of us were uninjured. Still, it took us a while to calm down and stop shaking.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger…yeah right. Look." He pointed at the top of the hill.

Now that all the snow was gone, all that was left was the rough, frozen snow from yesterday. If we had caused an avalanche right at the beginning, we would have been able to travel more safely. But there's no point dwelling on the past.

Soon, we found the place where Mamoru's sled had fallen. We took the faint animal trail in the bushes up the hill.

"Almost there."

There were no footprints to follow, but Satoru knew where he was going. At the thought of being reunited with Maria, I sped up unconsciously.

"Huh?" Satoru stopped without warning and I almost crashed into him.

"Don't stop all of a sudden like that!"

"I don't see the snow hut."

"No way…"

I looked around at the sparse forest. I thought this was the place, but I wasn't completely sure. It might be just a little farther ahead…

Me eyes fell upon two pine trees about thirty meters ahead.

"Over there! It was between those trees."

We searched the area carefully. There was no trace of the hut, but something looked off. There were clumps of snow stuck high up on the trunk.

"Someone destroyed the hut and leveled the snow." Satoru rubbed his chin, a sign that he was deep in thought. "A queerat couldn't have done it. There was a lot of snow; I don't think it could have managed to pulverize all of it and spread it around. Either Maria or Mamoru did it with cantus."

I felt slightly relieved. At least they had been fine when they left here.

"But which way did they go?" I looked around again. There were no footsteps or sled tracks.

"No idea. It looks like they made sure that no one would be able to follow them."

"You think they went to the trouble of erasing all their tracks?"

"The queerat probably did. Maria can fly quite well even when carrying Mamoru."

I was at a loss for words. I had thought everything would be fine once we made our way here. Now I realized how ridiculously naive I had been.

"…I don't suppose they went back home?" I asked hopefully.

Satoru shot me down immediately. "If they did, they wouldn't have had to erase their tracks."

What were we supposed to do? I was about to cry, but managed to hold it back because Satoru was with me.

"We have to look for them." Even as I said that, I was painfully aware that we didn't really have a plan.

"I know…but we should rest a little first. Let's build a fire and make lunch. It's no good trying to do anything when you're half-starving." Satoru brushed away the snow on a fallen log, sat down, and opened his backpack.

Feeling just slightly relieved, I sat down beside him.

Having to retrace our path back to the boats felt like a colossal waste of energy. But I couldn't complain. There wasn't a lot of time left.

The sky had grown darker as the cloud covered sun moved slowly west. It was probably just after three in the afternoon. The snow had mostly stopped; only the occasional flake fell here and there.

Our speedboats flew up the dark grey river.

Compared to two years ago, our steering skills had improved dramatically. That, plus the fact that the boats had been engineered for speed meant we traveled at a blistering pace. We passed through the Holy Barrier at some point, but since the rope didn't extend out onto the water, I'm not sure when exactly we did.

Our landing point wasn't clear, but we managed to do alright based on Satoru's sense of direction. There was a map in the boat, but we didn't have the time to study it, so we pressed on ahead.

Satoru slowed the boat and shouted across to me. "I think this is the right spot!"

"Are we going ashore?"

He pointed ahead to a wide bank with a snow-covered plain extending all the way north from it. This wouldn't be a bad starting point.

We moored the boats and went ashore. Since we had been using cantus the entire time, my head felt hot and stuffy. I wanted to stop and rest, but there wasn't time. We strapped on our skis and started moving immediately. We went up a hill and soon crested the ridge. From there we descended a gentle slope, letting gravity pull us down. Once we were on level ground, we shuffled forward using only our legs.

My head felt better after a while, but now the physical exertion made it hard to breathe. I gasped and wheezed desperately for air.

"Wait a sec…" I managed to call out as I stopped.

Satoru slowly turned around and came back toward me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just let me rest for a bit."

I collapsed onto the powdery snow and waited for my breathing to return to normal. The wind felt good against my burning face, but soon my sweat made me clammy and uncomfortable. Wisps of steam rose from my body as I dried it with cantus.

"Try to stay hydrated," Satoru said, handing me a cup of tea from his bottle.

"Thanks."

I looked up at Satoru as I drank. For the first time I saw how kind and reliable he was.

"What are you staring at?"

"I was just thinking about how nice you are."

He turned away abruptly.

"…hey, do you think we'll find them?"

"We will," he said firmly, looking back at me. "That's our only chance of saving them, right?"

"Yeah."

"That's why we've come all the way…what's wrong?"

I had frozen with the tea halfway to my mouth.

"Don't turn around. About a hundred meters behind you…there's something on the hill."

"What?"

"A queerat, I think."

All I could see was a dark shadow so I wasn't sure. It wasn't a bear or a monkey and it was too small to be human. I couldn't think of any other creatures that would be in this area.

Satoru used one of his special cantus techniques to create a floating mirror about thirty centimeters square and aimed it carefully at the hill far behind him.

"There it is," he said in a flat, quiet voice.

"Can we catch it?"

"It's too far away. We'd have to get closer."

Just then, the sun came out from behind the clouds and its light glinted off the mirror. The dark shadow vanished.

"It noticed us." Satoru clicked his tongue in frustration.

"We have to chase it."

We flew over the snow. The short break had restored my strength for the time being.

There was no way we'd catch it skiing as leisurely as we had been earlier. We put all our cantus into making the skis go faster.

We crossed the open field in an instant and were barreling up the hill.

"Which colony is it from?"

"Who knows? But it isn't Squonk, is it?"

It couldn't have gone that far in such a short amount of time.

The queerat was nowhere to be seen when we got to the top of the hill. We hurriedly scanned the ground for tracks.

"There!"

At the other end of the hill was a line of small footprints.

"This way," I said and immediately set off following the trail.

"Wait!" Satoru shouted.

"Huh?" The second I turned, the ground dropped out from under me.

I felt myself floating gently, falling through the snow.

Satoru's voice came from far away.

Then everything went dark.

I opened my eyes.

Above me was a ceiling made of woven bamboo. Light came from a paper lamp, making the shadows on the ceiling waver. I was in a small room, lying on top of a thin futon. There was a small hearth right next to me, on top of which was a bubbling iron kettle.

"Saki."

Satoru's voice. I turned toward it.

"What happened?"

Satoru smiled with what seemed to be relief. "You stepped through a cornice."

"A what?"

"An overhang of snow that collects on the edge of a mountain. From the top it looks like normal ground, but it's really just snow so if you walk onto it, you fall through."

"Did I fall all the way to the bottom?"

"No, I managed to stop you just before you hit. So you shouldn't have any injuries. I was worried because you didn't wake up though."

I moved my arms and legs slowly. Everything seemed to work. After the surge of fear, all I felt was weariness. I wanted to sleep.

"What is this place?"

"Take a guess. You'll be surprised. It's the place we've been looking for. "

"No way…seriously? The Robber Fly colony?"

"Yeah. It's a small place, but this is the colony's guesthouse."

Satoru explained that the queerat we had been chasing was a soldier of the Robber Fly colony. When it saw me fall, it had hurried back to report the incident. The colony had sent out a rescue team and brought me back.

"So you've met Squealer already?"

"Yeah. But he's been promoted and has a different name now."

I heard a voice outside the room.

"Thank goodness you've awoken."

"Squealer!"

Appearance-wise Squealer looked no different from other queerats, but his voice was unmistakable. Two years ago he had been wearing shabby armor, but he now had on a comfortable bear fur robe.

"It has been a long time, gods."

"It really has. Have you been doing well in the meantime?"

"Yes, thank you. …lately the chances to show devotion to the gods have been plentiful, and I was honored to be bestowed with a most noble name," he said, puffing out his chest a little.

"What is it?"

"I am now Yakomaru. It's written with the characters for 'wild fox'."

It seemed that Squealer…Yakomaru really had been promoted. Since he was more of a strategist than a warrior, it was fitting that his name had the word 'fox' in it, in contrast with Kiroumaru's 'wolf'.

"In the past two years, the Robber Fly colony has made great strides towards recovery. Once, our very existence had hung in the balance, but we have merged with a few neighboring colonies and our numbers now reach eighteen thousand. This was possible only because of the favor of the gods…"

"I'd love to hear about the colony later, but we have an emergency right now," Satoru said, interrupting the beginning of what sounded to be a long-winded speech. "We need your assistance."

"Certainly," Yakomaru agreed without even listening to the request. "Leave everything to your servant Yakomaru. I will always lay down my life to aid the two that I am most indebted to."

He sounded almost too willing, but at the time that was the reassurance we wanted to hear.

"Where's the Goat Moth colony?" I cut straight to the point.

"About four or five kilometers northwest of here. It's not affiliated with the Giant Hornet colony, and has been unwilling to join our coalition…one of the few independent colonies." His eyes flashed. "What would your business with the Goat Moths be?"

Satoru and I looked at each other. We needed Yakomaru's help, but that meant we had to reveal a certain amount of information.

"We're looking for our friends…" Satoru said, trying to summarize the situation without giving away more than he had to.

"I understand! And the fastest way would be to located the individual called Squonk. We'll go to the Goat Moth colony first thing tomorrow."

"I'd rather go right away…"

"I understand your feelings in the matter, but the snowy paths are dangerous at night. I fear that the Goat Moths might also construe our approach as a raid. There are only four or five hours until sunrise, if you don't mind waiting."

I was surprised that it was already so late. I looked over to Satoru, and he nodded, agreeing to postpone our departure until morning.

"We have prepared a simple meal. It's not much, but I hope you will enjoy it."

At his signal, two queerats came in bearing lacquered trays.

It reminded me of the rice gruel I had eaten at the Giant Hornet's camp two years ago. Soft rice, miso soup with burdock, taro and other ingredients, unidentifiable dried foods, and grilled fish. The dried food was tasteless and hard as shoe leather, but everything else was alright.

Yakomaru stayed with us as we ate and pestered us with questions. It was obvious he was only pretending to chat with us in order to glean more information, and that annoyed me. When we finished eating, I decided to make a request.

"When we came here two years ago, it was nighttime too, wasn't it?"

"Yes, yes. I'm very fond of that memory. Though, to be exact, it wasn't at this location."

"That time, we paid a visit to the queen even though it was already very late. I would like to greet the queen now, too."

For some reason, Yakomaru looked perplexed. "I see…very well. I suppose the queen would be resting right now, but let us go anyway. If you like, I could show you the colony at the same time. It has changed considerably."

We left the guesthouse and followed him into the colony. We were stunned by what we saw.

Two years ago, the queerats had mostly lived underground. The only things close to aboveground structures were small towers that resembled anthills. But now, the collection of dwellings they had looked just like a town.

The most common buildings were shaped like giant mushrooms. Yakomaru explained that the framework was made of wood or bamboo, and then covered with clay or processed manure. Lights glowed in the round windows and doors.

"Since we're subterranean creatures by nature, all the houses are connected by a network of tunnels."

There were factories for smelting, weaving, dyeing, and papermaking all crammed together and bustling with night workers. There was even a cement plant in the center of it all. Limestone brought all the way from Mt. Tsukuba was pulverized, mixed with clay and baked at high temperatures. It was then mixed with gypsum and pulverized again to make cement. Sand or gravel was added to make mortar or concrete.

"And this is the first of our buildings made with concrete." Yakomaru gestured to the center of the colony.

It was a round, flat-topped structure thirty meters in diameter. I could only stare in wonder at this building that was as dignified as any building from the ancient civilization.

"This is assembly hall of the colony," Yakomaru said proudly. "The sixty representatives of the eighteen thousand of us discuss and decide matters in this building."

Two years ago, the colony was centered on the queen's nest. How was it possible to bring about such a drastic change in such a short amount of time?

"What happened to the nest?

His tone darkened a little at my question. "As you can see, we have moved most of our activities aboveground. As such, restructuring of the nest was also inevitable. In addition, as colonies joined, they each brought their own queen, and it became necessary to consolidate them under one roof…"

"Then let's go. We have to ask her about tomorrow too."

"As you will. …but colony matters are decided by the assembly. In this particular case, I, Yakomaru, will act as the representative and take all responsibility of-"

"Whatever," Satoru snapped. "We just want to say hello."

Yakomaru looked defeated. "…very well. I will show you the way."

Just then, the servant that had been sent ahead to check on the queen returned. He made his report in a squeaky voice and Yakomaru dismissed him with a wave of the hand.

"If you will follow me."

Lantern in hand, Yakomaru led us away from the factories toward the nearest of a row of dirt buildings.

"What's this…?"I frowned in confusion.

The queen's dwelling was extremely shabby. It was fairly large, but had only rough dirt walls and a thatched hay roof. It looked like a building for livestock.

An offensive smell greeted us as the heavy doors were opened.

I remembered that the nest had a pungent, animal smell when we last visited. But this was different. It was a more bearable stink, but there was also the tang of disinfectant in it, creating a strangely repulsive scent.

To be more specific, the old nest had a terrifyingly strong scent of life. But this building smelled like a hospital filled with compost from the Lotus Farms–an unnatural, sickly odor.

The building had a long, rectangular shape, with a passage running down the center of its length. It reminded me of a barn. Sturdy wooden enclosures were built along both sides, but it was too dark to see inside them.

But I felt the presence of a number of giant creatures. They stirred as they caught our scent, but made no other noises, not even a sigh or a groan. Over the rustling sounds, I heard the jingle of chains.

I looked toward Yakomaru in surprise, but his face was outside the circle of lamplight so I couldn't see his expression.

"Here lives our queen," he said, stopping in front of one of the enclosures.

"Your highness, it's been a long time. I'm Saki, we've met before," I said quietly.

There was no response.

"Please enter." Yakomaru opened the door and walked in briskly.

We followed timidly.

He shone his lantern on the queen who crouched at the far end of the enclosure.

What looked like a giant hornworm appeared. A wrinkled, pale body with four stubby legs.

There was a quiet puffing sound, like a pair of bellows. It was the regular breathing of someone sleeping.

I felt relieved. She was asleep. Of course, it was past midnight, after all.

Gently, so as not to wake the queen, I touched her abdomen. It moved up and down in a slow, leisurely way characteristic of most giant animals.

"Sleep well."

As we walked, I ran my hands over her head. On her forehead, I felt a strange joint. The queen did not wake.

"Careful." Satoru sounded worried. "She might bite even if she's sleeping."

"It's okay. I'll be able to tell if she's about to wake up."

Just as I said that, my hand slipped and poked the queen's eye. I jumped and jerked my hand back. Her head twitched, but there was no other response.

A feeling of horror welled up inside me. The eye I had just poked…

"Bring the light over here!" I commanded.

Yakomaru hesitated for an instant, then turned slowly.

The queen's eyes were open. She hadn't been asleep. But her pupils were dilated, and there was no gleam of intelligence in her eyes. No, more than that, her eyes were dry–she was probably blind. Her mouth hung open, revealing teeth even bigger than a tainted cat's, and drool soaked the hay she was lying on.

I snatched the lantern from Yakomaru and approached the queen. On the right side of her forehead was a V-shaped surgical scar. The thick sutures rose up like a ridge on her skin.

"What the hell is this?" Satoru demanded.

"We had no other choice," Yakomaru said dejectedly.

"No other choice? What did you do to your queen?"

As our voices echoed in the barn, the sounds of rustling and clinking chains grew louder.

"I will explain. Let us go outside."

We left the building. The wind chilled me to the bone, but blew away the stench that clung to our clothes.

"It was not our intent to treat the queen so cruelly. …she is, after all, the mother of the colony."

"Then why?" I drew closer to him.

As I did so, queerat soldiers appeared out of nowhere and surrounded us. Yakomaru dismissed them with a slight shake of the head.

"Did you not feel it when you last saw her? The queen has not been mentally stable for a while now."

"Yes, somewhat."

"In any colony, the queen holds absolute power. Our queen has always been rather tyrannical, but she became more and more violent as her illness worsened. She attacked innocent servants on a whim, injuring and killing them on a regular basis. On top of that, she became increasingly paranoid and executed all the ministers who had been working tirelessly to help us recover from the Ground Spider attack. If we had allowed this to continue, it would only have been a matter of time until our colony became extinct."

"That's why you…" Satoru started to say, but stopped.

"We swear absolute loyalty to the colony and the queen. But we are not tools to be discarded. We are second in intelligence only to the gods of this planet, and are unlike other social animals such as ants or bees. And so, based on this belief, all who worried for the future of our colony gathered of their own volition and formed a union."

"A union?"

"Yes. It was necessary to negotiate with the queen to preserve our most basic rights. But the queen was enraged. She regarded our actions as an act of treason. …there were a number of complications, and it was with great reluctance we chose this path."

"This path…you joined forces and completely crippled her. Wouldn't it have been better just to kill her?" Satoru asked.

Yakomaru shook his head. "No. We did not wish to completely destroy her mental faculties. We only performed a frontal lobe lobotomy. After the surgery, her aggressiveness declined greatly and she became submissive. She continues to bear children and contribute to the growth of the

colony. I'm sure the queen herself is much happier like this compared to when she was trapped by her mental illness. …however, since it was our first time performing the procedure, there were several complications with regards to hygiene. Shortly afterward, she began suffering from encephalitis and her mental functions declined considerably."

"That's terrible…" I whispered.

"It is natural to think that, I suppose. How regrettable." Yakomaru looked at us accusingly. "Should not all intelligent individuals be given equal rights? That is what I read in the books of the gods. It is the core principle of democracy."

We looked at each other, bewildered. I never thought I would hear such words spoken by these creatures.

"Even if your queen was a tyrant, what about the others? Was it really necessary to lock them up like animals in that barn?"

"All the colonies who joined us were dealing with the same problem to some degree. Only the queen can reproduce, so her existence is indispensable. Even so, she should not be able to claim the entire colony as her possession on those grounds. The queen is responsible only for childbirth, whereas intellectual pursuits such as governance and military leadership are handed to those with the greatest aptitude. That is the foundation of the Robber Fly colony."

The two most powerful colonies at the time, the Giant Hornet and Robber Fly colonies, had very different philosophies. The Giant Hornet colony had over thirty thousand members, making them the largest colony. Although General Kiroumaru led the colony, he was a traditionalist who was deeply loyal to the queen, thus preserving the traditional social structure. All traditionalist colonies held to the idea that the queen was an absolute monarch.

On the other hand, the Robber Flies disregarded bloodline purity and joined with other colonies in a highly unorthodox, rapid bid for power. Traditionalist colonies viewed them as heretics and had started to become wary of them.

"…I see. Well, I have no intention of interfering with your business," Satoru said, stretching. "I'm kind of tired. We'll go rest until dawn."

"As you wish. I will have beds prepared immediately." Yakomaru's eyes glowed faintly green in the dark.

We returned to the guesthouse. Once Yakomaru left, Satoru stoked the fire in the hearth and sat down to warm his feet. He sighed loudly.

"I don't like this. I really don't like this."

"Why?"

"The colony, Squealer…Yakomaru, it's all really fishy. What they say and what they think seem to be completely different. I can't trust them."

"But we need their help if we want to find Maria and Mamoru."

"That's true," he said, still looking troubled. "But you saw what he did to the queen. She's his own mother! How could he do something so terrible?"

"Well, I mean, it shocked me too." I shivered as I recalled the empty look in the queen's eyes. "…but, no matter how articulate queerats are, they're still beasts in the end. No matter how much

their emotions resemble ours, they're not the same. What Yakomaru said has a certain logic to it. They only did what they had to do to survive."

"Look at you defending them."

"I'm not," I said, sitting up straight. "Don't humans always project their own values onto animals? We say they have a gentle personality, or that mothers should sacrifice themselves for their child. But that's not realistic. I've read books on animal behavior from the ancient civilization."

Since my mother was a librarian, I probably had more chances to access restricted books than anyone else.

"And what they said was really surprising. Take hippos for example. In the picture books from Harmony School, they show hippos making a circle around one of their dead in order to grieve. But the truth is that hippos are omnivorous, and they surround dead hippos in order to eat them."

"Yeah, I know that."

"Kangaroos are the worst. We all think that they keep joeys in their pouches in order to take care of them."

"And?"

"When they're being chased by predators, the mother will throw the baby out of her pouch and escape as the predator eats the joey."

Satoru frowned. "That's kind of what minoshiro do. But worse, because they give up their own body parts."

"That's why it's a mistake to judge queerats through the lens of human ethics."

Satoru clasped his hands behind his neck. "Hmm. But that's not what I meant when I said I don't like this. It's more like they seem too similar to humans."

"It's true that there are no other animals like them."

Satoru shuffled over to the door to make sure no one was outside. "I have the strange feeling they're trying to replace humans. There aren't any concrete buildings in Kamisu 66. When I saw their factories, I could only think that they are trying to claim for themselves the material culture that we've abandoned."

I asked the question that had been gnawing away at me. "I wonder where Yakomaru gained all that knowledge. He said he read about it."

"But he couldn't have simply come across a book that explained everything he wanted to know."

"Then how?"

"This is just my guess, but maybe he captured a false minoshiro. False minoshiro can hypnotize people with its lights, but they might not have any effect on queerats."

The more I talked with Satoru, the more frightened I became. The existence of queerats has always been viewed as something ominous, but now I suddenly felt the full weight of this sentiment.

"…queerats couldn't possibly be planning to overthrow humans, could they?"

"Isn't that impossible? I mean, just the two of us could easily crush the entire colony."

Indeed, no matter how much queerats developed their material culture, there was no way for them to defeat a human with cantus. Besides, cantus was what had destroyed highly developed culture in the first place. But I couldn't shake off my feeling of unease.

"Hey, what would happen if Yakomaru did to a human what he did to the queen?"

Satoru furrowed his brows. "I suppose they'd become just as disabled. …I know what you're thinking. If they perfect their technique, they might be able to produce humans they can control."

I felt a chill. "Wouldn't…if that happened, wouldn't it be a disaster?"

"Nope, it would be fine," Satoru grinned. "The frontal lobe controls our will and creativity. That means our cantus is also controlled by the frontal lobe. Someone who has their will and creativity taken away would never be able to use their power. So there's no need to worry."

We stopped there and spent the next few hours trying to get what little sleep we could. I might have gotten a lot of sleep earlier, but Satoru hadn't.

As I drifted off on the bed the queerats had prepared, a series of nightmarish images floated through my mind. Like Satoru, I had felt something was horribly wrong ever since I came to the Robber Fly colony.

But before I could figure out what that thing was, I drifted away into darkness.

6

The sky was just beginning to brighten when I awoke.

The guest house was made of bamboo posts covered by animal skin, more like a tent than an actual house, so once the sun came up, light started filtering in through the skin.

Satoru was already up and getting dressed.

"'Morning," I said.

Satoru nodded. "Can you be ready soon? It looks like they're all prepared to go. I've been hearing them moving around for a while now."

Sure enough, a large number of queerats were bustling around busily outside.

"Okay."

I rushed around getting ready. It took less than two minutes for me to put on my winter clothes, lace up my boots, and check my backpack to make sure everything was there.

I stepped outside to clear skies and the sun just barely peeking over the horizon.

Looking down, I saw a queerat taking down what looked like dried food hanging from a nearby tree. It was white, about a meter long, too big to be a fish. I looked closer and saw that it was a dried minoshiro.

Satoru and I glanced at each other.

"I can't believe they eat minoshiro."

Minoshiro are considered sacred creatures in Kamisu 66, and it gave me an unspeakably ominous feeling to see them being used as food.

"…minoshiro should be hibernating now. The queerats probably dug them out intentionally to turn them into jerky."

Satoru looked like he had swallowed something sour. I decided not to tell him that the unknown dried thing we had for dinner last night might have been minoshiro.

I saw Yakomaru coming towards us.

"Good morning, gods. We will be departing soon, but would you like to have breakfast first?"

The thought of having to eat minoshiro jerky made me lose my appetite.

"What about you guys?"

"We can eat while we travel. It's just military rations, so it doesn't taste too good."

"That's fine, we'll do the same."

"As you wish."

Yakomaru was wearing a hooded fur coat and riveted leather armor. His bureaucratic air from two years ago was still present, but now he looked much more like a general. He blew a whistle that hung around his neck and two hundred queerats lined up in formation.

"Hey, is it really necessary to send out this many soldiers?" Satoru asked, frowning.

"There might be unexpected dangers on the road. We are prepared to do anything to protect the gods," Yakomaru said reverently.

We joined him in the middle of the formation. Apparently being in the rear was just as dangerous as being at the very front. Muscular guards bearing large shields surrounded us on all sides.

Most of the snow around the colony had been cleared away and bits of frost crunched under our feet as we walked. As we made our way onto the snowy plains, Satoru and I put on our skis. The soldiers also wore shoes that resembled simple skis, and their short legs worked rapidly to propel them forward. Since we were able to move so much faster with cantus, Satoru was starting to get annoyed at their slow pace.

"Can't we go any faster? If you tell us where it is, we can go on ahead."

"I'm very sorry. We cannot move as swiftly as the gods. But the Goat Moth colony is not much farther, so please bear with us. If you went ahead, I would not be able to reach you in time should anything happen."

So we had no choice but to follow their pace. As we moved slowly over the plain, the queerats distributed their food rations. They were round, like pills or sweet dumplings, and a little bit sweet. They appeared to be made of rice flour, with honey, dried plums, and nuts rolled together. As Yakomaru said, it wasn't anything delicious, but at least there wasn't minoshiro in it.

As we left the plain, we started climbing a series of hills. I wondered why the area was so hilly, but it was impossible to see what was buried under the snow. All I could tell was that the hills were made of a different type of dirt. Even the plants growing on it were different from the norm.

A strange image floated through my mind.

It was the remnants of a battle between cantus users, where one side had attempted to annihilate the other in one stroke. They had fired an gigantic boulder and its impact had caused more destruction than even the nuclear weapons of the ancient civilization. It was like what had wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago, a meteor over ten kilometers in diameter.

I was being ridiculous. Common sense told me something like that was impossible. Of course, in theory, cantus was an unlimited amount of energy. But in reality, there are a lot of restrictions that control how that energy could be activated. In order to affect something, you needed to have a perfect image of how that object would be changed. So with something as large and complex as a meteor strike, the mind was its own limiter. It was as impossible as trying to create a realistic image of the earth being split in half.

But… I looked over the hills overlapping each other like a mountain range. Even novice cantus users like us were able to start landslides and throw fairly large rocks. It might not be out of the question for geniuses like Shisei Kaburagi to move entire hills.

"We will arrive soon," Yakomaru said. "Around the next bend you will see the Goat Moth colony's stronghold built halfway up the hill."

What appeared wasn't so much a hill as a monolith. It was 150 meters tall and 300 meters wide. The rock face was so sheer that no snow accumulated on it, and so smooth that scaling it seemed to be virtually impossible.

"It's just a wall…I don't see a stronghold anywhere," Satoru said, squinting.

"Over there. Can you see it? There is a hidden cave entrance where that pine tree is growing out from the rock."

I couldn't see it even following the direction he was pointing. Nothing moved, and there was only silence around us.

"The Goat Moth colony has dug far and deep into the rock over the years, turning the entire cliff into their stronghold."

"But where do they go in from?" I still couldn't see it.

"I don't know. They must have tunnels extending underground as well, cleverly hiding the entrance. But usually, they drop a rope ladder from the cave entrance up there to get in and out. We can't see it now because they must have retracted it after learning of our approach. They refuse to communicate with the other colonies, and hide if strangers approach. …but they must know that won't work this time around."

Yakomaru called out to soldiers at the rear of the formation. It wasn't as strange looking as the Ground Spider mutants, but this soldier had bulging chest muscles, and carried a large tube shaped like a megaphone.

The soldier listened to Yakomaru for a minute, then turned toward the Goat Moth stronghold and started shouting its message. It was so loud I thought my eardrums would burst. Satoru and I clapped our hands over our ears, looking in disbelief as the queerats stood listening as if nothing were wrong.

The shouting continued at such volume that I thought it would start an avalanche. The Goat Moths did not respond.

"Well, it appears we will have to show that we are here in earnest."

At Yakomaru's command, the archers formed up and raised their bows.

"Wait, we're not here to fight!" Satoru objected.

"I agree. But you can clearly see that they are ignoring our summons. In order get these lazy, arrogant creatures to obey, you must scare them into submission."

Yakomaru gave the order.

Instantly, dozens of arrows flew toward the pine tree on the cliff in a beautiful arc. Most of them bounced off the cliff, but a few stuck to the tree, and one embedded itself in a crack between the stone.

Still no response. At Yakomaru's command, the archers lined up to shoot again. This time, they wrapped oil-soaked cloth to the head of the arrows and set them alight.

Dozens of flaming arrows cut through the air.

The pine tree soon started to burn and give off black smoke. Finally, there was movement. I saw a spray of snow. It looked like they were trying to put out the fire from the other side of the tree.

"I'm sure they understand the situation now. I will try to summon them again."

Yakomaru raised his right hand. The soldier with the megaphone started its earsplitting shriek again. Although I couldn't understand what it was saying, its tone was surprisingly aggressive. Was this really just a summons?

Finally, the answer came in the form of a volley of arrows.

All around the pine tree, countless arrow slits had opened in the rock, allowing them to send out waves of arrows.

The enemy arrows came from above in a straight line, traveling at considerable speed. Having no shields, Yakomaru's archers and the megaphone soldier were about to become pincushions.

The next instant, the swarm of arrows was parted by an invisible force and flew away in all directions.

Satoru and I had changed the course of the arrows in the same way we had parted the avalanche. I thought it was impressive how we had sprung into action at the same time. I guess we had known each other for so long that we could almost read each other's mind.

There followed what seemed to be a confused silence from the Goat Moths. A strong wind could blow arrows off course, but having them suddenly part in different directions mere feet from the target was not something that happened naturally.

"You have my heartfelt thanks! I am overwhelmed with gratitude, for you saved the lives of my soldiers!" Yakomaru bowed deeply. "But as you can see, the Goat Moths are a colony of godless heathens. I will advise them to respond to our summons once more, but if they continue to ignore it, more forceful methods may be necessary."

Without waiting for us to respond, Yakomaru positioned the megaphone soldier at the front of the troop again. I still couldn't understand the words, but its tone of voice was even more overbearing and malicious than before. I didn't think it was a simple message of ceasefire and parley. No doubt it was some sort of ultimatum.

The Goat Moths seemed to be struggling to respond to this unexpected situation. But just as I expected, the Robber Fly's message had provoked some of the soldiers. A single arrow came flying toward the megaphone soldier.

This time, Satoru and I did not synchronize our movements as well. We both tried to stop the arrow. Space seemed to warp and in the shimmering light, a strange rainbow appeared. It was the interference pattern of two cantus coming in contact. The result of such contact could be unimaginably devastating. We both stopped immediately. The arrow vanished along with the light.

It was an exaggerated defense against a single arrow, but to the Goat Moths, it probably appeared to be a deliberate show of force.

"Gods! The Goat Moths have fired an arrow knowing you are among us. It is blasphemy! Please bring down divine punishment upon them."

"…but it was just a single arrow. Maybe it was an accident." I was reluctant to do as Yakomaru said.

"Just one arrow is enough! Just drawing a bow on a god is a crime serious enough to bring annihilation to the entire colony. …furthermore, we have reached a stalemate. If the Goat Moths will not listen to us, we have no way of finding your friends."

"All right, I understand." Satoru came to a decision first.

"Don't be too harsh," I said to Satoru.

After all, Squonk had rescued Mamoru. To deal his colony a killing blow would be poor repayment for the deed.

"I know." Satoru turned to face the stronghold and muttered his cantus.

The pine tree growing at the mouth of the cave gave a dry snap and fell away.

The soldier hiding behind it stood petrified.

Then, with a deep boom, the stone cracked as if punched by a giant fist. Shards of stone went flying. Another punch. …and another. The stone around arrow slits crumbled and giant hole opened.

"That's enough! Stop it!" I shouted.

As I looked around, high-pitched shouting came from above us. Although it sounded the same as the megaphone soldier's screams, these were somehow more piteous.

The megaphone soldier responded harshly. A couple of queerats appeared at the mouth of the cave. Over half of them wore scale armor, and I assumed they were high ranking officers. The one in the center wore a cape. I later learned that he was the regent of the Goat Moth colony, Quichy. The other queerats lowered a rope to the ground.

Glancing to the side, I noticed Yakomaru standing silently with a strange expression on his face. It seemed to be anger mixed with uncontainable joy.

There's probably no point writing down every detail of Yakomaru and Quichy's meeting. Basically, Yakomaru treated him just as a victor lords over the loser. I couldn't understand their conversation, but Yakomaru appeared to be making a number of one-sided demands. No matter how unreasonable the demands were, Quichy was in no position to refuse.

Growing impatient, Satoru interrupted their talk and, finally, was able to ask about Maria and Mamoru's whereabouts. At Quichy's command, Squonk was brought before us.

Squonk cringed as he came, but seemed to perk up a little when he saw us.

"Squonk, do you remember us?"

"Kikikiki… yes, gods."

"Where did Maria and Mamoru go?" Satoru got right to the point.

"I do't know, gods."

"You don't know? Weren't you with them?"

"Yes. But they went far away."

I closed my eyes, unable to resist the despair flooding my heart.

"Far away? Where?"

"I do't know."

"Don't you at least know the direction?"

"I do't know. K-gods. But I have a ledder."

From inside his tattered shirt, Squonk took out an envelope and handed it to me. I opened the envelope quickly. The letter inside was written in Maria's handwriting.

To Saki, my love.

By the time you read this letter, Mamoru and I are probably somewhere very far away.

I never would have thought I'd have to write such a farewell letter to my dearest friend and lover. I'm really, really sorry.

Please don't look for us.

Writing this makes me strangely sad. I remember we were so angry when Mamoru left us a letter with these very same words. But I'm afraid I'm not eloquent enough to say it any other way.

I'm really happy that you are so worried about us. And I understand how you feel. If our places had been reversed, I would be worried as well. However, there is no other way.

We can't live in Kamisu 66 any longer. The town would not allow it. If it were just me, that might have been alright, but Mamoru has already been branded as one unfit to live. There's no turning back once you're branded. Don't you think we're treated more like objects to be disposed of if found defective than like human beings? Once the kiln is opened and the pottery examined, all that are found to be warped or cracked are fated to be smashed. If all that awaited us was destruction, then we decided we would rather run away in hopes of finding a different future.

To be honest, I wanted to go with you. That's the absolute truth. But you're different from us. I've told you before, that you're an incredibly strong person. I don't mean physically, or in terms of will or spirit. Rather, you're easily moved to tears and quickly discouraged. I loved that part about you too. But no matter what difficulties you face, even if every fiber of your being is consumed by grief, you always recover. You don't break easily.

I'm certain you can continue to live and become a valuable member of the community.

The same doesn't go for Mamoru. And if I let him out of my sight, he will not live long. Please understand.

Once I left town, one thing became clear to me.

The towns are twisted.

Don't you think so? Can towns that kill their children to maintain peace and order be considered a normal human society? According to the false minoshiro, our history is one filled with bloodshed. However, I don't think our current society is any better than the dark ages of the past. Looking back on what happened in the towns, I am beginning to see what it is that warps it.

It is the adults' deep fear of all children.

Perhaps this has always been this case. It's obvious that seeing the next generation tear down everything you have struggled to build is difficult to accept, especially if it's your own children.

The way the adults of Kamisu 66 look upon their children is different, however. It's as if they are watching a row of eggs hatching, waiting anxiously to see if it is an angel, or, in a one in a million chance, a demon.

Based on intuition and premonition, hundreds upon thousands of eggs are smashed and discarded, and I refuse to be one of them.

When I decided that I had to leave the home I was born and raised in, I was overcome by sadness and loneliness. But when I thought about how everyone else would feel, it gave me pause. If I were to be eliminated by the town, my parents would be devastated at first, but forget about me in time. Just as your parents did with your sister.

I believe that our relationship is different. If I were to be disposed of, I'm sure you wouldn't leave me to die. If you were in danger, Satoru or I would do anything to save you.

We had another friend. One whose name we aren't even allowed to remember. He, X, would have come to our aid too, right?

That's why I have to help Mamoru now.

But being separated from you and Satoru is so incredibly painful.

Luckily, we have our cantus, a powerful tool that will probably help us survive even if we are cast out into the wilderness. That is the one thing for which I am deeply grateful to the town and to Sage Academy.

From now on, Mamoru and I will create a new life together.

To that end, I have a request. If the town asks about us, I want you to tell them that we have died. We are planning to go far away to escape the eye of the townspeople, but if they could forget about us, it would help me sleep much better at night.

I hope from the bottom of my heart that there will come a day when we will meet again.

With love, Maria

My tears continued to fall long after I had finished the letter.

Inside the envelope was a sketch by Mamoru of Maria and me, smiling together.

As Satoru took the letter and began reading it silently, he put his arm around my shoulder. I tried to stifle my sobs, but the tears just wouldn't stop. The feeling that I would never see Maria again seemed to be turning into reality.

After the snow hut was destroyed, the only clue we had to go on was Squonk. So that was what we ordered the Robber Fly colony to look for. Even though we didn't completely trust Yakomaru, the situation was dangerous enough that we needed all the help we could get.

But in the end, we were the ones that had been used. To the cunning queerat, tricking a couple of blindly desperate kids was child's play.

The robber flies from which the colony gets their name are so called because of the vicious way they trap and suck out the innards of other insects. The characters in the name, 塩屋, come from the white tip at the end of the male fly's body. Another species with the same characteristic is called the great birdcatcher fly.[*] There are no records of this species in the ancient encyclopedias, so they must have appeared only in the past millennium. Even now they are rarely seen, apart from a small

[*] Robber flies are called 虫引虻 (mushihiki abu); there is a related subfamily of flies called シオヤアブ (shioya abu), and this is the pronunciation for the queerat colony. It's usually written in katakana, but the book uses the kanji 塩屋虻, because 塩屋 describes the white tip on fly's body. So when Saki talks about the birdcatcher flies, 塩屋大鳥引 (shioya ootorihiki, literally white-tip great birdcatcher), she's referring to the bugcatcher naming convention. Birdcatcher flies are fictional.

area outside the Holy Barrier. Compared to robber flies, they are much larger, between thirteen and eighteen centimeters in length, with long, thin bodies like a dragonfly's, lined with numerous spiracles for efficient oxygen exchange. Because of this, we used to call them thousand-eyed dragonflies when we were younger.

Great birdcatcher flies tend to lurk behind tree branches, waiting for sparrows, thrushes, white-eyes, Japanese tits, shrikes, starlings and other small birds to pass by before attacking from behind and killing the bird by severing its medulla oblongata with its sword like mouth. Then it would gorge itself on the bird's blood until it was so fat it could no longer fly. They have even been known to attack crows.

While the Robber Fly colony may symbolize the bottom of the food chain in name, their penchant for overthrowing their superiors make them more predators, like the great birdcatcher, than prey.

After somehow following the trail to the Goat Moth colony, further clues as to Maria's whereabouts stopped abruptly.

Despite Yakomaru's promise to put forth every effort in the search, we had no idea exactly how much we could rely on him, and there was no way he would be able to do it in time. My promise to Tomiko, to find and bring Maria and Mamoru back by tomorrow, was looking more and more hopeless.

Satoru and I discussed for a while, and came up with an alternative plan.

"As you wish! Leave it all your servant Yakomaru."

There was no choice but to follow Maria's instructions in the letter and report to the town that they were dead. When I asked Yakomaru to corroborate with our story, he promised to do so without a second of hesitation. I had thought for sure that he would disapprove of lying to the Ethics Committee, but he agreed so readily it made me suspicious.

"I think the best story will be to say that they were swept away by an avalanche. Since no one knows where they were buried, it'll be difficult to find the bodies."

True, that was the most plausible story. For someone with cantus to fall to their death was unusual, but saying that Maria had fallen trying to save Mamoru as he fell from his sled would probably work.

"It might take a bit of time, but I believe we will be able to produce some bones. If those are presented to the committee, it might help the story."

We started.

"What do you mean, bones? Where are you thinking of getting them?" Satoru asked, his tone severe.

Yakomaru went pale and stammered, "…no, that is not what I meant! You misunderstand! Of course, procuring a god's bones would be impossible. Forgive me for saying so, but some of our bones are visually similar to yours. An exceptionally tall queerat is about the same height as a young god. So, if we carefully scrape those bones against rocks…"

"Enough! I get it. I'll leave you to deal with it," I said quickly to shut him up.

Listening to Yakomaru made me feel like we were really going to desecrate their corpses.

"As you wish. Please leave everything to me."

I didn't know whether Yakomaru understood my feelings or not, but he bowed respectfully.

Our two-day trip up the river had been for naught. I couldn't help but sigh. We refused Yakomaru's offer to stay another night at with the colony and set out for our return. To the place where the snow huts had been. According to Squonk's story, that would have been the place where Maria parted with him.

We strapped on our skis and pointed in the direction where we had left the speedboats.

Judging from the sun's position, it was just past noon. But I didn't feel hungry at all. And it wasn't because running on adrenaline. Even though I could feel impatience burning inside my chest, my emotions were as cold as the snowy hills around me.

There was no way to find out where Maria and Mamoru had gone. And even if I did know, I couldn't go after her.

I was like an athlete in a competition against an opponent with an overwhelming lead. Even if victory was impossible, I would continue my futile struggle until the match was over.

What, or who, in the world was I trying to deceive? Was I trying to preserve, for my own sake, the image of myself as someone who would never abandon a dear friend? Or was it simply because Satoru was there?

I looked ahead at Satoru. He seemed so calm, but I had no way of knowing how he really felt. Was he, like me, trying desperately to avoid the looming pit of despair? Or was he thinking about something else entirely?

When I noticed it was just the two of us skiing side by side, I realized what I had truly been afraid of.

Excluding my parents, Sage Academy was my entire world. And within it, the only people I could call my true friends were those in team one. One by one, those friends had disappeared until only Satoru and I were left.

No, I thought wildly, I don't want to lose any more friends.

I don't want to lose anyone else I love.

Satoru's figure blurred and became someone else's.

Without thinking, I stretched out my hand. For a second, a familiar figure that had been sealed in the graveyard of my mind appeared before my eyes. But it was nothing more than an illusion, and vanished as quickly as it had come.

I was forced back into cold, hard reality. In this world, it was just the two of us.

Perhaps Maria was feeling just as lonely. No, I couldn't even come close to how she felt. She had thrown away everything and run.

Unlike yesterday, today the sky was clear and the sun reflected so brightly off the snow I could barely see. But despite the cheery weather, I couldn't shake off the feeling of gloom that covered me like a cloud.

Thanks to Satoru's uncanny sense of direction, we soon found the speedboats. As I took off my skis, Satoru pushed the boats out onto the water.

"I'll steer, so you can rest a bit," he said, turning toward me.

"Why? Aren't you tired?" I asked, but only out of habit.

"It's fine." He pushed me away gently.

With that, I lost all will to resist and collapsed against the boat after muttering a quick, "Thanks."

I dozed off almost instantly. It was as if I were falling through the boat and into the hands of the kappa waiting to take me to the bottom of the river.

I dreamt. At first, they were only incoherent nightmares caused by my stress and fatigue, but soon, strange monsters started appearing from the depth of my subconscious.

There were demons waving long, insect antennae, circling blindly around and around on the ground. A group of one-eyed goblins flew overhead, trailing dust from their moth-like wings.

The souls of the damned shamble along, chained to each other. Large cow sacs clung to their abdomen and controlled them so thoroughly that even though they wanted to escape, they could only stare and moan.

Half-transparent, pink minoshiro twisted their bodies seductively. Their feelers were erect penises, and the clitorises at their base opened and closed like sea anemones.

On the other side, the god of death, appearing as the shadow of a giant cat, glided past on silent feet.

Queerats sniffed their air with their ugly snouts. Their faces were completely smooth and featureless, but in exchange, the folds of their skin held numerous eyes that swiveled about unceasingly and flashed razor-sharp teeth.

But scariest were the fiends, children whose faces were gradually covered with sprays of blood, their eyes rolling back until only the whites were showing in the ecstasy of slaughter.

The monstrous creatures seethed and writhed. And there he was, at the far end of it all.

Half hidden in shadow, the figure of a boy. Everything from his feet to his torso, and most of his neck was visible, but his face was hidden in darkness.

The faceless boy. I tried desperately to call out to him, but his name just wouldn't come.

He seemed to recognize me, but said nothing. Last time, I could hear him but not see him. This time, it was the opposite.

But I could understand the message he was trying to send–anxiety and concern.

"How can I find Maria?"

The faceless boy shook his head slightly.

"I don't understand. What should I do?"

He didn't respond.

"Tell me, please. What in the world should I do?"

He didn't say a word, and I couldn't see his lips, but somehow, I knew what he said.

Bewildered, I stood rooted to the spot. I couldn't understand why he would say something like that. Then his next words hit me like a bolt of lightning.

No. It can't be. What are you saying? That's so cruel…

I tried to protest, but no words came out.

"Saki. Saki!"

A voice was calling me.

I suddenly awoke.

"Saki, were you having a nightmare?"

I opened my eyes and saw Satoru's worried face peering into mine.

"…yeah, kind of."

I was drenched in sweat. I tried to smile, but it probably just looked like an unnatural grimace.

"We're here. We'll have to use our skis from here on out." He looked concerned. "Do you want to wait here? I think I'll be alright by myself."

I shook my head firmly. "I'll come too."

"…okay. Got it."

He seemed to realize it was pointless to try to talk me out of it.

Our tracks were still clearly visible around the area where the snow huts had been. This was the place we had set out from yesterday. All we had accomplished in the past day was to circle back right where we had started.

No, it was even worse than that. The day before, we had known we were in for a difficult journey, but we also felt certain that we would be able to find Maria. Now, there was nothing to go on.

Still, we strapped on our skis and pushed off, hoping for a stroke of good luck.

The second search yielded no results.

Maria and Mamoru seemed to have managed to unearth the sled and take it with them. But even after scouring the area within a ten-meter radius, we couldn't find a single sled track. Maria probably anticipated that the town would search the immediate area and levitated it out. Once they were a good distance away, she could set it down and erase its tracks in the snow as they traveled.

As I watched the sun sink behind the mountains to the west, quiet despair and resignation welled up inside me.

"Saki." Satoru put his arms around me from behind. "Don't cry. …we did all we could."

That was when I realized I was crying. Somehow, I hadn't even noticed the warmth of my tears as they rolled down my cheeks.

"We still have time tomorrow before the deadline. Once it's light out, let's go northwest. Maybe we'll find some trace of their tracks there."

I knew he was just trying to console me, but unless we were the three princes of Serendip, we'd never find them.

Still, his words were comforting.

We prepared to spend the night out in the snow-covered fields. Although we had brought tents with us in the boat, we decided to take a leaf out of Squonk's book and build a snow hut.

We piled the snow around us into a hard, compact dome then hollowed out the inside. Since we had cantus, I thought we'd do a better job at it than Squonk had, but it was surprisingly difficult. Packing snow was actually easier with a shovel than with cantus. But the real problem was that neither of us was really focused on building the hut.

Once we had shelter, it was time to make dinner. I had no appetite, but we hadn't eaten since breakfast, so I had to force myself to eat no matter what.

Satoru carved a nice stone pot, filled it with snow, and put it over the fire. He added miso and rice to make gruel.

We ate in silence.

Satoru tried to draw me into a conversation, but I just couldn't find the energy to answer. He continued talking anyway.

"…so I want to capture a false minoshiro and see exactly how much of what the book says is accurate."

I wasn't trying to ignore him on purpose, but only parts of his sentences made their way into my mind.

"…isn't it obvious that something as powerful as cantus can't be powered by the tiny amount of energy released when glucose is metabolized? So the author proposed two hypotheses about where the energy comes from. The first was that all cantus used in the solar system drew its energy from the sun. I don't understand how exactly the sun's energy is harnessed, but by this theory, you wouldn't be able to use cantus if you were outside the solar system. Or at the very least, the method of activating your power would be completely different. Isn't that interesting? Though of course, since it's impossible to prove or disprove this hypothesis, he could just be making it all up."

"…so using psychokinesis, cantus in other words, steals energy from the sun and decreases its entropy, making it age faster. The sun's lifetime is supposed to be around five hundred thousand years, but if we keep using our cantus, its death might come much sooner."

"…the second theory is even harder to understand. In quantum mechanics, the observer effect states that simply observing a phenomenon alters it. This occurs on everything from the microscopic to macroscopic scale. It's like the false minoshiro said, the existence of cantus was first proven in an experiment by that one scientist."

"…in short, time, space, physical substances, were all reduced to information. Cantus has the unbelievable power to rewrite the very information that creates the universe. So if you take this idea all the way, it's possible to completely change the universe. That's a huge, circular notion. First the building blocks of the universe are created, starting from quarks and building up to the elements, organic matter, and life itself. Then species evolve and develop a complex brain with which they use to transform the universe…"

"…the most fascinating thing is that psychological mechanisms behind cantus are almost exactly the same as those used in shamanism in undeveloped societies. A social anthropologist named Frazer put magic in two categories, contagious magic and sympathetic magic. The latter one is especially…"

"Hey, Satoru," I interrupted. "Will we forget about Maria and Mamoru too?"

His expression hardened. "Not even if I'm dead."

"But what if the Board of Education alters our…"

"I won't let them do it again," he said. "They're dead wrong if they think they can control my thoughts and memories forever. If they try to force something on us again, we'll just leave town."

"We?"

"You're coming with me, aren't you?" He looked a little worried.

I smiled. "It's the other way around."

"What?"

"*I* will leave the town. And you'll follow me."

Satoru looked dumbstruck for a few moments, then finally smiled in defeat.

"Fine. That works too."

"Hey, if we do leave, let's look for Maria and Mamoru and live with them."

"Yeah, of course. Four are better than two."

"Exactly! And when we find them…" I stopped. I couldn't speak, as if something were stuck in my throat. My body began to shake, and I burst into tears.

When I finally found my voice, all I could do was wail.

Satoru held me as I cried.

That night we slept together in the snow hut.

It was my first time being penetrated, and more painful than I had imagined. Maria and I had experimented with each other quite a bit, but intercourse between male and female was totally different, and it hurt.

"Are you okay? Does it hurt?" Satoru asked, stopping in mid-motion.

"Mhmm. Wait a little. I'll get used to it soon," I answered through gritted teeth.

Why was life so unfair to woman? I complained mentally. In addition to the inconvenience of forty weeks of pregnancy, we also have to go through pain that a man could never endure in order to give birth. So why does sex have to hurt too?

"Don't push yourself."

"It's fine. …doesn't it hurt for you?"

"Not at all."

I suddenly realized that although Satoru knew full well I was in pain, he was too aroused to stop. And far from empathizing with me, he was probably getting off on it. What an asshole.

But soon the pain disappeared. I felt myself growing wet. Instead of feeling like I was being forced into something unpleasant, pleasure began to take hold.

I moaned and Satoru asked, "Does it feel good?"

"You idiot."

It was an unneeded question. Instead of answering, I raked his back hungrily.

So I was no longer a virgin. And now I was forced to think about how I would pass our next physical exam. Once again, it was the woman who had to deal with it.

Satoru's movements grew more intense. Even as I felt my pleasure mounting, I had a moment of panic. If I got pregnant, things would get really complicated.

But before I could stop him, Satoru froze.

I thought he had finally realized the problem, but that wasn't it.

He was looking down at me with an expression of such love and tenderness, I thought he was about to cry.

I had a sudden realization. His look wasn't directed at me. I wasn't sure how, but he seemed to see in me the shadow of the boy he had never stopped loving.

At the same time, I felt from the bottom of my heart a longing for the same boy.

Satoru started moving again, faster this time.

I was quickly reaching my climax. When I orgasmed, the face I saw was no longer Satoru's, but another boy's.

Both of us were using each other to make love to someone who was no longer in this world. It might be extremely abnormal, and you might even say we were cheating on each other, but we both knew and wanted it.

After I orgasmed, Satoru pulled out and came on the wall of the hut.

For a while, we simply lay panting.

Even in the pleasant afterglow of sex, the words the faceless boy had said in my dream went around and around in my mind.

Why did he tell me what he did?

He told me not to aid Maria's escape.

And that she had to die.

V

Fires of the Apocalypse

1

I washed the daikon, burdock, carrot and other root vegetables and cut them into bite-sized pieces. I scooped everything into a bowl and brought it to the naked mole rat nest box in the breeding center. They usually live in burrows underground, but at the present were doing quite well in a complicated network of glass tunnels.

I opened hatch to the feeding area and emptied the contents of the bowl inside. Hearing the sound of tumbling food, the mole rats hurried through the tunnels to feed. As subterranean creatures, they have poor eyesight and are sensitive to sounds and vibrations.

They were all completely hairless and resembled wrinkly sausages or ham with stubby legs. In order to easily identify the worker rats, the sides of their bodies were labeled in permanent ink with numbers from P1 through P31 in order of birth. The 'P' meant that they were property of the public office, but we also said it was because they were little porkers.*

As the workers started eating, a naked mole rat twice their size appeared. It bumped into P8 coming in the other direction in one of the tunnels, but continued forward as if nothing were there. P8 scrabbled desperately for a foothold, but was flattened as the big mole rat walked right over it.

The big mole rat was Salami, the queen of the nest. She was a darker red than the workers and had white and brown spots on her body, making her look like a salami sausage, hence her name.

Three mole rats labeled ♂1 through ♂3 followed behind her. Since there were few fertile males in a colony, these three were not required to gather food or protect the nest. Their only duty was to mate with Salami to produce more mole rats, even though they are originally Salami's sons.

When Salami approached the feeding areas, all the workers moved aside to let her through. Queen Salami and her beloved sons had the first pick of the meal.

It's rare to find an animal whose appearance and behavior makes you feel so depressed. And even though I'd developed some compassion for the naked mole rats as I looked after them, I couldn't help disliking them every time I noticed how similar they were to their cousins, the queerats.

* The kanji 公 means 'public' (referring to "public office" in this case), but it's also a pun because the character can be broken into the katakana ハ and ム, which reads "ham"

And therein lies the question. What in the world were people of the past thinking when they decided to selectively breed these ugly creatures to the point of having near-human intelligence?

Granted, other than naked mole rats, there were no mammals that exhibited eusocial behaviors like that of a worker bee obeying its queen. But if all they wanted was an animal to subjugate and use as servants, I could think of a number of more appealing animals. For example, if they wanted subterranean animals, meerkats were much friendlier and easier on the eyes.

Anyway, raising naked mole rats was my job, whether I liked it or not. But it was not my main duty. My real responsibility was the investigation and regulation of queerats in the Exospecies Control Division of the Department of Health in Hayring.

July, year 237. I was 26. Six years ago, I graduated from Sage Academy and found a job at the Department of Health. Those who had graduated with top grades in cantus were entered into a lottery where various studios could bid to have them as an employee. On the other hand, people like me, who were average at cantus but had excellent academic grades, usually found administrative positions at various departments in the district.

To be honest, I had fantasized on more than one occasion that when I graduated, the Ethics Committee would call upon me to assume the position of future leader of the villages. But for some reason, Tomiko had maintained an air of complete indifference, and I had to admit that assuming I would be invited to work in the very heart of the town's governing body was a huge overestimation of my abilities.

Given all the things that had happened in my life until now, I didn't exactly trust the Board of Education (rather, to say I hated them would be more accurate), so I couldn't look for work there. The library would have been okay, but I wanted to escape my mother's protective grasp as soon as possible. And since my father was still the mayor (he held office for an unusually long time), I avoided any positions directly related to the town hall. In the end, there was nowhere else for me to go but the Department of Health.

Just to make it clear though, I didn't choose this job based purely on the process of elimination.

I don't know how to explain it, but I had a bad feeling about the queerats. Sometime in the future, the queerats were going to cause a catastrophe. This idea had become an obsession of mine. The fact that most people viewed queerats as nothing more than disgusting animals with monkey-like intelligence was another reason for this sense of danger.

When I said that I wanted to work in the Exospecies Division, all I got were dumb stares and quiet sniggers in response. It appeared they all thought I just wanted the easy job.

"Saki, you've got a visitor." Mr. Watabiki's voice came slowly over the speaking tube.

"I'll be there in a second."

I finished scooping out the rest of the feed, washed my hands, and left the room. No one ever came to our division. I had no idea who the visitor could be.

Mr. Watabiki greeted me with a smile when I opened the door to the Exospecies Division office. He had graduated from Sage Academy forty years ago and worked at the Department of Health ever since. His last job before retirement was to train me to take his place as the manager of

the division. He was a soft-spoken man and a good boss, but I wondered what he was like outside of this easy job.

"So you and Asahina were in the same year?"

Satoru stood before Mr. Watabiki.

"…yes, that's right," I said, a little confused.

"I see. Well, it's a little early, but why don't you take your lunch break? There's not much work today anyway."

"No, I-" I started to protest.

"Um…Mr. Watabiki. I'm here on business today," Satoru said hurriedly.

What business was he talking about?

"I see, I see. Well, I'll head out for lunch then. You guys can talk here."

He gave us a knowing look and left. Before I even had time to reply, we were alone in the room.

"Your boss has quite the imagination," Satoru said, trying to break the awkward silence.

We hadn't talked to each other in over a month after having an argument about something I could no longer remember.

"Well? How can I help you?" I said coolly.

I wasn't trying to continue giving him the cold shoulder, I was just focused on what he was here for.

"Uh, yeah. I have a couple questions about the queerats." His voice was a pleasant baritone.

As a kid, he had always given me the impression of a playful little puppy, but once adolescence hit, he had transformed into a tall, slender young man. Even though I was taller than most girls, I still had to look up to talk to him.

"Are there any colonies at war right now?"

His question caught me so off guard I forgot I was trying to be formal with him.

"War? …no, there shouldn't be."

"Are you sure? Not even skirmishes between small colonies?"

I pulled open a desk drawer and took out a couple of ledgers. I gestured for Satoru to sit down at the reception table.

"Look. They have to fill out this application before going to war. They risk annihilation of their colony as punishment if they don't, so it's unthinkable that they would fail to do so."

He looked curiously at the papers I handed him.

"'Exospecies A. Form ①: Application for Intercolonial War'…? Do they have to fill this out even if they want to launch a surprise attack?"

"It's not like we'd leak information to the other side."

"'Exospecies A. Form ②: Intercolonial Reorganization Notice' and 'Exospecies B. Form ①: Application for Whelp Transfer'. I see, I guess that's why they need a literate member in each colony," he said.

"Yes. Every form needs to be signed by way of noseprint by the one who reports directly to the Queen as well as another queerat in a high administrative position. …don't you think it's ridiculous?"

"What?"

"This job, you must think it's stupid. All this pencil pushing is just for show. What you do is different and actually helps the villages."

"You're putting it too harshly."

Satoru was right.

He had been in the top three in our class in both cantus and academics, and had gotten offers from multiple studios. He could have entrusted his future to the lottery, but instead he chose to work at the Lotus Farms. There was a system in place for public institutions that let him nominate where he wanted to work. Like me, his choice came as very unexpected. But after seeing him do research at the genetic modification lab with Yuu Tatebe, who was second to none in his field, I couldn't help but think that he had made the right choice.

Since Satoru's main skill was manipulating light, he was working on creating a new microscope whose magnification would be supplemented with cantus.

"It's just…the wording is peculiar. Your division deals mainly with queerats, right? So why do they use the word "exospecies" and not "queerat"?"

"Because 'Department of Queerat Control' is kind of strange too."

As I said that, an old question I'd always had popped in my mind. It seems like we purposely avoided using "queerat" and only used "exospecies" at work. They'd even correct you if you said it in casual conversation.

"…anyway, what were you saying about the queerats fighting?" I turned back to the original topic.

"Oh yeah. You probably know already, but our research often relies on queerats gathering samples for us. Sometimes they have to dive to the bottom of the swamps in the forest to find samples."

"You're using the Spider Wasp and Ground Beetle colonies, right?"

"Yeah. The Spider Wasps were sent to gather slime mold on the far side of Oakgrove. They were ambushed there yesterday morning."

"Attacked?"

"They aren't sure which colony the attackers are from, just that they suddenly fired upon them. The Spider Wasps were unprepared for fighting and had to retreat. Still, a number of them died."

"…maybe some hunters made a mistake?"

"No, the Spider Wasps were in an open area. The attackers hid themselves and ambushed them. It was clearly on purpose."

I thought about it. The queerats were a warmongering species, but I couldn't think of a colony that would make such a show of force in a time when there wasn't much tension between the groups.

"I wonder if they knew they were attacking the Spider Wasp colony."

"I don't know. Why?" Satoru looked a little indignant.

"For one, the Spider Wasps aren't a weak colony. They have considerable fighting power and they're allied with the Giant Hornets. It would be like sending a declaration of war to the Giant Hornets."

"Going against our rules, provoking the strongest colony…it must be a foreign species."

We were both remembering the Ground Spiders. Only a foreign species unfamiliar with the rules here would take such reckless action.

"But there haven't been any foreign colonies around in a while. Whenever foreign scouts are spotted, the colonies report it to us immediately."

Satoru stood up and went over to the window. He crossed his arms and looked out.

"I thought someone here would know something. But the mystery's only deepened."

"So did the Spider Wasps come to you to tell you about the attack?"

I suddenly had a strange feeling about this.

"No, one of our men ran into the Spider Wasps in the forest. They asked for help so he searched the forest with them, but the attackers were long gone."

"Hmm."

Somehow, it didn't make sense. Normally, when a colony was attacked, the first thing it would do was to report it to us and apply for permission to retaliate. And yet, we had heard nothing from the Spider Wasps.

"In any case, it's a problem if we leave the situation as it is. It's interfering with the samples I need collected, and it's disrespecting our authority."

"You're right. We'll investigate it as soon as possible."

"What will you do if you find the colony that launched the attack?"

"There will be some form of punishment at the very least. Either the Giant Hornets will be ordered to carry it out, or one of our offices will do it."

Within the Department of Health, the Environmental Health and Pest Control divisions worked closely with us. If the latter was sent out on assignment, it meant that an entire colony was being exterminated.

"Still…" Satoru looked like he was trying not to smile."

"What?"

"Nothing. You just seemed like the real department chief around here with the way you talk."

We smiled at each other. The distance between us had disappeared.

At the time, I was happy that some stupid colony had given Satoru and I the chance to make up.

However, despite being the person in the town most wary of the queerats, even I couldn't imagine the terrible future this event foreshadowed.

The monthly meetings at the Department of Health were always full of the same droning reports that bored everyone to tears. That's why the attendants of the July meeting came as such a shock.

Three leaders from the district sat next to Hiroshi Kaneko, the head of the department. Koufuu Hino represented the Occupations Council. Shisei Kaburagi was consultant for the Security Council. And Tomiko Asahina, head of the Ethics Committee, was also present. The first two were known for being the most powerful and most skilled cantus users in the district, they were the very definitions of the words used to describe them. And of course, I don't need to explain who Tomiko is.

It was rare for the three of them to be seen anywhere, much less at our monthly meeting at the Department of Health. Maybe there was an outbreak of some new disease.

"We have a priority matter to discuss today, so we'll skip the reports from each division." Kaneko said, sounding more nervous than usual. "One week ago, six members of the Spider Wasp colony, who the researchers at the Lotus Farms rely on for sample collection, were attacked by an unknown party. Two of the six have perished from the poison arrows."

People began to mutter. Not because they thought this was some huge event. They were wondering why the deaths of a few queerats were the most important topic in the meeting.

"At present, none of the exosp…queerats have been given permission to wage war, and there are no applications pending review. So this attack was a flagrant disregard for the law and grounds for disciplinary action. Two representatives from the exospecies are waiting in another room to give testimony so we can decide on the proper punishment. Before that, it will help if everyone is familiarized with the current power balance of the exospecies. Saki Watanabe, if you please."

"Yes." I stood up a little tensely. I went over to the whiteboard and turned to bow to the room. This was originally Mr. Watabiki's job, but I knew more about the queerats than anyone else at the moment. "After a number of shifts in the last ten years, the various exospecies colonies in the Kanto area have settled into two factions of roughly equal power." I drew a line down the whiteboard with my cantus and created a rough chart. Even though I was writing with cantus, my handwriting unfortunately still looked like chicken scratch.

"The first is the Giant Hornet faction. The Giant Hornets themselves have about a hundred thousand soldiers. The colonies under them are the Paper Wasp, Spider Wasp, Wood Ant, Ground Beetle, Tiger Beetle, Carrion Beetle, Praying Mantis, Dragonfly, Giant Stag Beetle, Diving Beetle, Cricket, Cone-headed Katydid, and Cave Cricket colonies. Altogether, they have about five hundred thousand warriors. They have proven extremely loyal to humans and are entrusted with important physical labor."

"May I ask a question?" Shisei Kaburagi raised a hand. Although his hairline had begun to recede a little, he still looked as imposing as ever in his black sunglasses.

"Please," Mr. Kaneko said quickly.

"The queerats…or exospecies…what sort of bond holds these colonies together? Aren't most groups monolithic in nature?"

"The Giant Hornet faction can be thought of as a feudal society. Each colony in the faction serves its own queen, and is pledged to the Giant Hornet colony. If one colony is attacked, it is viewed as an attack on the entire faction. Virile males are moved around the colonies, and a new

queen is chosen from a different colony each time the current one becomes too old to bear offspring. In this way, blood ties are strengthened and treason is highly unlikely to occur."

Shisei Kaburagi nodded.

"The other group is the Robber Fly faction. The Robber Flies have around 55 thousand warriors. When you include the Deerfly, Pyraloid Moth, Garden Tiger Moth, Armyworm, Blue Centipede, Orb Spider, Tachina Fly, and Leaf Hopper colonies, they are 250 to 300 thousand strong. They are also extremely loyal to humans, and have suggested for some time that they be allowed to share the work given solely to the Giant Hornets. …to answer your previous question, the integration of these colonies is far more complicated. Many colonies have changed their names to those of fortresses or military divisions."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"For starters, all the colonies have overthrown their queens by means of revolution. All decisions in a colony are made by elected representatives, and representatives from each colony convene to make decisions for the entire faction. The queen's sole duty is reproduction."

The muttering started again. Most people knew as much about changes in queerat society as they did about the movement of tectonic plates. They had no idea that these colonies were treating the queen like livestock.

"Almost all colonies have gravitated to one of the two groups, leaving almost no independent ones. The only one with any sort of power is probably the Millipede colony, which came from the mainland and has since been naturalized."

"I see. …so essentially, there is a high chance that either the Robber Fly or Millipede Colony was behind the attack?" Shisei Kaburagi pressed.

I glanced at Mr. Kaneko, trying to decide how to answer the question.

"…based on careful analysis of the evidence left at the scene, we've determined that the Goat Moths were the attackers."

"The Goat Moths?" he said doubtfully. "That name isn't on the list for either faction. And it's not an independent faction either."

"The Goat Moths have declared their neutrality for over a decade now," I answered. "That's why they are not on the list, but given the present situation, they can be considered allied with the Robber Fly colony. They are a special case."

I couldn't bring myself to say that it might have been Satoru and I who brought the two colonies together twelve years ago.

"I see. So that's how it is!" Koufuu Hino said, a smile appearing on his large face as he looked around at everyone. His bald head shone a ruddy red. "In other words, the problem is this might not end with the extermination of just one colony. This could be taken as rebellion against human rule if the Robber Fly faction was involved in the conspiracy. We might have to stamp out half the queerat population!"

"Well…it's still too early to say," Mr. Kaneko said quickly.

But Koufuu's words had changed the mood in the meeting room. Killing upwards of 300 thousand queerats was a huge deal. That was why the three most important people in the district were here.

"I would like to summon the representatives of the exospecies. We have the supreme commander of the Giant Hornet colony, Kiroumaru, and the representative of the Robber Fly colony, Yakomaru. Does anyone have any objections? I would like to start with Kiroumaru's testimony."

The only person who spoke up was Tomiko, who had been silent so far. "As an observer in the meeting, I don't intend to give commands, but I would like to suggest having both of them here at the same time. If their stories do not match up, we can have them confront each other directly to see who is telling the truth."

"I see, I will do as you say. Well then." Mr. Kaneko nodded.

Mr. Watabiki quickly left the room and brought the two queerats.

Dressed in a white robe and standing as tall as a normal human, Kiroumaru walked slowly forward. He looked even more imposing than he did fourteen years ago, but I could see a hint of old age in his posture. It seemed that queerats aged faster than humans, though not as quickly as naked mole rats.

Behind Kiroumaru came Yakomaru, also dressed in white. He was considerably shorter, but was in the prime of his life and looked dignified and full of energy. They stood apart from each other at the side of the meeting room, avoiding each other's eyes.

"Well then, I shall address Kiroumaru of the Giant Hornet colony first," Mr. Kaneko said in a stern voice. "The Spider Wasp colony is under the Giant Hornet faction, yes?"

"That is correct," Kiroumaru answered a little hoarsely.

"One week ago, six soldiers of the Spider Wasp colony were attacked by an unknown party and two have since died. You are aware of this?"

"Yes."

"Do you hold anyone guilty?"

"Based on what the survivors have relayed to me, the party immediately responsible for the attack is the Goat Moth colony."

"Immediately responsible? So it is your belief that they were acting upon orders?"

"Yes." Kiroumaru stared directly at Yakomaru. "The Goat Moth colony is part of the Robber Fly faction. So I assume the Robber Fly colony gave the orders."

Yakomaru looked like he was itching to speak, but after looking at the humans sitting around the room, fell still again.

"Now I will address Yakomaru of the Robber Fly colony. Did you order the Goat Moth colony to attack the Spider Wasp soldiers?"

"Absolutely not!" Yakomaru shouted with his arms crossed in front of his chest. "By the deities of heaven and earth, I swear that we gave no such order."

"But is the Goat Moth colony not affiliated with you? Or rather, under your rule?"

"It is true we have approached the Goat Moths and labored to join forces. However, our efforts have yet to bear fruit. The reasons are twofold. First, most members of the colony still cling to the old ways of thinking and will not leave monarchal rule behind. Second, the Giant Hornets have had their eye on the Goat Moths for a long time. As allying with us would appear invite violent repercussions, it seems their options were awfully limited."

"Kiroumaru, is Yakomaru telling the truth?"

"It is the nonsense of a sophist who piles lies upon lies." He bared his teeth in a wolfish grin. "It is absolutely absurd. Please don't trust the words of this treacherous snake. To address his first point, I have been informed the Goat Moth queen has already been taken captive. As for his second claim, I can tell you we have never threatened the Goat Moth colony."

"Yakomaru." Mr. Kaneko turned his attention to the other queerat.

"My, my, I am shocked. The Goat Moth queen, held captive? What could be the source of such inane prattle? The queen is currently in good health and ruling over her colony. Although she entrusts political matters to her very capable regent, Quichy."

"What gall you have to tell such barefaced lies in front of the gods. Perhaps I should rip out that filthy tongue of yours," Kiroumaru said, his voice overflowing with menace.

"Kiroumaru, you are not to speak unless addressed."

Kiroumaru bowed his head at the rebuke.

"Yakomaru, was it? I have a few questions." Tomiko leaned forward. "You said the Goat Moth queen is in good health, but leaves affairs of the government to a regent. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that is correct." Yakomaru said smugly. If he had had the faintest idea who Tomiko was, he would have flung himself at her feet.

"Hmm. But if you are that familiar with their colony's inner workings, doesn't it imply that your own colony has a more intimate relationship with them than Kiroumaru's does?"

"Ah…uh…well, as I mentioned earlier, we put considerable effort into building a relationship with them…so naturally, I have some knowledge of their inner workings." Having been caught in a lie, Yakomaru began to sweat. "B-but, however close we may be, it is unthinkable that we would order them to defy the will of the gods. If we did, divine punishment would be brought upon us. Why would we take such a suicidal action?"

"So you're suggesting the Goat Moth colony acted on its own? That does not make much sense to me either."

"Yes, I have my own theories regarding that. May I explain?" Yakomaru quickly regained his composure.

"Certainly. Go on."

"For the sake of argument, let's assume that we gave the order to attack, or that the Goat Moths acted on their own. Either way, to attack another colony without permission from the gods is pure insanity. But what if this was all orchestrated by the Spider Wasp colony?"

Kiroumaru glared with such intensity that it seemed sparks were flying from his eyes. Yakomaru gave no notice.

"It wouldn't be impossible to obtain the weapons and armor used by the Goat Moths. Perhaps they split into two groups, staged an attack, and played the victim. Both Kiroumaru and my faction are equally matched in power, so if we were to meet in direct combat, both sides would suffer considerable losses. I hesitate to say this, but perhaps the Giant Hornets wanted to rely upon divine assistance to destroy us without putting themselves in danger…"

Kiroumaru's clenched fists shook in anger. He looked as though he were about to lunge at Yakomaru, but somehow held himself in check with an iron will.

"But two Spider Wasp soldiers perished," Mr. Kaneko cut in.

"I assume the loss of a few lives matter not to them. That is the fundamental difference between our colonies and his. For a democratic society like ours, each life carries equal rights, and is an irreplaceable existence in the universe. But the old system serves only the queen, and soldiers are merely disposable tools!"

There was no doubt that Yakomaru was born with a silver tongue. He had evaded all of Kiroumaru's attacks and sent them right back at him with just a few words. Although everyone here distrusted him to a certain extent, his logic was flawless.

"Do you think what Yakomaru says holds water? You stated earlier that you found the Goat Moths to be the guilty party." Tomiko said to Mr. Kaneko.

"Yes. …well, common sense would dictate otherwise, but his words cannot be dismissed entirely. I admit we did not consider the possibility of a charade," Mr. Kaneko said, sounding flustered.

In the end, the meeting was adjourned for the day without having reached a decision. The footsteps of destruction came ever closer, and we had lost our final, precious chance to forestall the impending disaster.

The sight of an army a hundred thousand strong was undeniably majestic. Their armor, painted yellow and black like the hornets they were named after, glittered blindingly in the sunlight. Like a single organism, thousands of banners fluttered to the same rhythm and their battle cry made even the trees tremble.

"Within the hour you shall witness the annihilation of our enemies," Kiroumaru declared.

Seeing his confidence, I was inclined to believe him.

"I know their battle strategy. Winning is unlikely in a head-on fight, so they will split into smaller platoons to carry out guerrilla tactics and secure better positions. But they are foolish if they think they will win with such a shallow plan. I am going to teach them a lesson they'll never forget."

"May the fortunes of war favor you." I felt extremely out of place, holding a stack of papers in the middle of an army. "However, we take a neutral stance in this war. If the enemy advances this far, we will retreat. Needless to say, we will not assist you in any way."

"I understand." Kiroumaru smiled his wolfish smile. "But you need not worry. Not even an enemy arrow will make it this far."

"Okay. Um, the Giant Hornets have a main force of a hundred thousand. The other side, which is allied forces of the Deerfly, Pyraloid Moth, Cabbage Armyworm, Orb Spider, and Leaf Hopper colonies, number a hundred-forty thousand. …huh? Why is the Robber Fly's main army not included?" I asked as I pored over the reports.

"You should ask that silver-tongued coward. But even with superior numbers, I doubt they have the bravery to face us directly. Perhaps they plan to use these smaller colonies as pawns to thin our forces. Even with all their drivel about being a democratic society, they still send soldiers to their death without a second thought," Kiroumaru spat.

"I see. Well, please fight to your heart's desire."

"I will."

He gave the signal and his army slowly started advancing. The allied forces, clearly the larger of the two, made a show of moving in response.

"You should step back a little," said Inui, the wildlife conservation officer sent to protect me. "Stray bullets might come into this area."

"What do you mean by bullets?"

"Queerat wars these days involve not just bows and arrows, but also arquebuses. They are too fast for the eye to see, so you can't stop them with cantus."

I quickly retreated to a safe distance. As if they had been waiting for me to leave, the cries on the battlefield suddenly intensified. The two armies began to fight.

Arrows flew through the air, followed by harsh bangs and puffs of smoke.

I looked out over the battlefield from the hill we stood on. Against the allied army's line of archers and gunmen, the Giant Hornets attacked with long spears in a wedge formation. The allied army probably hoped to stop the Giant Hornets in their tracks with a unified assault, but their plan fell apart almost instantly. The Giant Hornets came straight at them through the hail of bullets without the slightest hesitation.

Looking carefully, I saw that the soldiers at the front of the wedge were holding strangely shaped shields.

"Those are deflecting the bullets," Inui explained.

Although he was shorter and skinnier than I was, Inui had the energy and endurance to travel through the wilderness for days without rest. That combined with his extensive experience as a wildlife conservation officer made him the most reliable person in the Department of Health.

"The bullets can easily pierce normal armor, but if you look carefully at the shields, you'll see that they're made at an angle. That deflects the bullets to the sides."

He explained that shields were first made with rows of bamboo arranged into a V, over which layers of stiff linen were glued and allowed to harden. Then the surface was covered with a thick coat of wax and, finally, metal pipes. The shields were apparently highly effective at deflecting bullets.

"The bamboo part of the shields are just like the ones used by the ancient civilization during the Warring States. But the addition of linen, wax, metal, and shaping to deflect bullets were all thought up by the queerats themselves."

"I can't believe it. I knew they were smart, but…"

"I don't know if they actually know anything about the equipment used during the Warring States, but it's hard to imagine they invented these things on their own. I'm convinced they have a source of knowledge."

I immediately thought of the false minoshiro. When we visited the Robber Fly colony twelve years ago, Satoru had wondered whether they had captured a false minoshiro. Of course, the Giant Hornet colony might have captured one too. But since the existence of false minoshiro was a secret, I couldn't tell Inui about it.

The battle began to shift in the Giant Hornets' favor. Their archers began firing on the enemy gunmen. Between volleys of shots, they would continue pressing forward.

"The arquebuses too. They're inefficient because you can only fire once. Then you have to clean out the inside, reload the powder and bullet, and pack it all down before you can fire again. But the queerats have managed to eliminate this step almost entirely. In the ancient past, Japan had designed a rudimentary cartridge, and the queerats simplified it even further. They've improved the whole thing dramatically."

I watched the gunmen fire, insert a new cartridge into the barrel, and prepare to fire again.

"I don't know exactly how they're made, but the general idea is that the bullet and gunpowder are wrapped in oiled paper and inserted into the gun barrel to allow for sequential firing. …sometimes their intelligence frightens me."

Overcome by the difference in firepower, the Giant Hornets could have chosen to pull back and engage in long-range combat, but they pushed forward still and began a brutal close-quarters fight.

"You know just about everything about queerats, don't you? And here I thought I knew a good deal already."

"No, no… Your knowledge is a lot more comprehensive. I've just had a lot of opportunities to see how their colonies function from the inside, thanks to my job," Inui said, flushing. "Do you know what they call us wildlife conservation officers amongst themselves? Regular humans are gods, but we're the gods of death. Well, I guess you can't blame them."

Contrary to their name, the wildlife conservation officers don't do much wildlife conservation. Their main jobs are to eradicate harmful species and stamp out any queerats who disobey human rule.

"…anyway, I've seen a good number of colonies, and the strongest is the Giant Hornets, no doubt about it. And they're especially formidable in close-range fights."

"Why are they so powerful?"

Inui smiled. "It's a secret I haven't even told the higher-ups, but I'll tell you. The Giant Hornet soldiers all take a certain drug before battles."

"Drugs? Like narcotics?"

"Something like that. They blend cannabis with a certain psychotropic substance extracted from the queen's urine. The formula is a secret, but it seems that when they take it, their mind is cleared, their sense of duty is heightened, and their aggression reaches a peak while all sense of fear is suppressed. It creates the ultimate soldier."

A chill ran up my spine. The Giant Hornet soldiers were indeed swarming over the battlefield, throwing themselves at the enemy without the slightest hesitation. The scene overlapped with my memory from fourteen years ago. They had faced down the enormous Ground Spider mutants with bravery that bordered on recklessness.

The fight was over in just over an hour. The allied army, which had started with an advantage in numbers, was now reduced by half. Survivors limped away in ragged groups and the rest lay dead on the field.

"I am deeply ashamed that I could not do as promised." Kiroumaru returned from his position on the front lines. "It's difficult to believe it took over an hour to deal with this pack of weaklings." Kiroumaru smiled, but there was a chilling, wolfish gleam in his green eyes.

I had returned to the Department of Health and was writing up the battle report when Mr. Watabiki appeared, looking flustered.

"Welcome back."

"Ah, Saki. How did it go?"

"…the Giant Hornets had an overwhelming victory. I think it'll be hard for the Robber Flies to recover from this."

"I see. Well, I'm not surprised, since Kiroumaru was in command."

It pained me to think about the innumerable corpses piled all around the battlefield. Although they were rodents, they had the intelligence to commit such acts of violence.

But there was no time to feel bad for them. If we simply let the bodies rot where they were, there was the risk of spreading infectious diseases. Usually, cleaning up was the job of the Environmental Health division, but since the queerats had reached a temporary truce, they were tasked with burying the dead. Although, mass incineration of the corpses with cantus might still be necessary.

"How did it go on your end?"

"Um, well, the result was unexpected," Mr. Watabiki said, his face unreadable.

"So you mean the Goat Moths won?"

"Yes, in a sense. …the Spider Wasps changed sides."

"Huh?" I was speechless.

I couldn't believe it. I thought I had completely understood the dynamics between the colonies. Learning that the Spider Wasps had betrayed Kiroumaru and gone over to Yakomaru's side was like seeing the sun rise in the west.

Didn't the whole war start because the Spider Wasps were attacked by the Goat Moths? But now they had abandoned their allies and joined the enemy.

Then I remembered. Right after they had been attacked, the Spider Wasps happened to run into a worker from the Lotus Farms and told him what had occurred. However, the colony never filed an official complaint with the Exospecies division.

Why? The queerats were vengeful creatures at heart, and it was unimaginable that they would simply hide and lick their wounds after such an attack. That might happen if the enemy were overwhelmingly powerful, but the Spider Wasps had the strength of the Giant Hornet faction behind it, and would have had the advantage.

"…so what happened in the battle?"

"The Spider Wasps abandoned formation and joined up with the Goat Moths. The Spider Wasps' allies, the Ground Beetles, Tiger Beetles, and Army Ants, were completely dumbfounded. They couldn't defend at all and were destroyed."

"I'm shocked."

"It's quite a mystery."

"So then, with one win and one loss, we're back to square one again."

"I don't know about that. Even now, I doubt there'd be a fair fight between the two of them. Of course, the Spider Wasps joining the enemy side is a big hit to the Giant Hornet troops, but I think the Giant Hornets still hold the upper hand."

Mr. Watabiki's optimistic outlook (which stemmed from the fact that since the Giant Hornet faction was the most loyal to humans, it would be more convenient for us if they won) was shattered just four days later.

Unexpectedly, it was Satoru who brought the news.

"Saki! Have you heard?" He came barging into the room, flushed and out of breath.

"What?" I looked at him in bewilderment.

"The war! The main forces of the Giant Hornets and Robber Flies had their final battle."

"I haven't heard anything about it. I've said that they inform me of fights beforehand, but sometimes skirmishes happen unpredictably…still, they're supposed to make an effort to let me know the time and location so I can be there as witness and write my reports."

"So you don't know the outcome?"

"No…do you?"

"I happened to be passing by near the battleground. There were some samples I absolutely needed to have, but since the queerats we normally use are now out of commission, I had to go find them myself."

"That's dangerous. Entering their battlegrounds isn't allowed." I frowned.

"Yeah, but it was for a time-sensitive experiment…I think it must have been the day after the end of the fight. There was an injured soldier hiding out so I gave him some first aid and asked what happened."

Strictly speaking, treating injured queerats was considered interfering with their wars and was prohibited. But that wasn't important right now. I wanted to know what happened.

"So, what happened? Did the Giant Hornets win?"

Satoru shook his head. "Just the opposite. They were annihilated."

"What? I don't believe it." I gasped.

"The soldier wasn't that good at Japanese, so I'm not sure what exactly happened, but basically, the entire army was wiped out…massacred. It appears that Kiroumaru managed to escape, but his whereabouts are unknown."

2

The mood at the Security Council was oppressively grim.

"Does anyone have any questions about Satoru Asahina's testimony?" the head of the council, Shisei Kaburagi, asked in a low voice.

A short silence followed.

This time, every important official in the district was present. Tomiko from the Committee of Ethics. Head of the Board of Education, Hiromi Torigai. Kofuu Hino from the Occupations Council. My mother, Head Librarian Mizuho Watanabe. My father, Mayor Takashi Sugiura. And Hiroshi Kaneko from the Department of Health, as well as the all of his staff. Head Priest Mushin, who was now over a hundred years old, from the Temple of Purity was absent, but two monks were there to represent him.

My father spoke first.

"Asahina-kun. I'd like to hear your theory about how the Giant Hornet colony was killed."

Satoru licked his lips. "I really have no idea. Based on the sheer number corpses at the scene, all Giant Hornet soldiers, all I got was the impression of a one-sided massacre."

"What was the main cause of death?"

"I don't know that either. Many were pierced with arrows, but the majority were mutilated beyond recognition."

"What sort of mutilation?"

"Many were cut to pieces, or shot full of holes as if they had been used for target practice."

"What did you learn from the surviving soldier?"

"He only knew a couple of phrases, so things like, 'Giant Hornets, killed', 'Massacre', 'Only Kiroumaru escaped'. I tried to ask what happened, but he started hyperventilating and screaming in his own language."

"You couldn't tell him to translate?"

"No. He died soon after that."

Silence once again.

"Chairman," Tomiko said, looking up. "What were the results from the scene analysis?"

Everyone's eyes turned toward Kaburagi Shisei.

"After hearing Satoru Asahina's story, I visited the battleground yesterday, but unfortunately, it had already been wiped clean of any possible evidence."

"Wiped clean? What do you mean?"

"The area was doused in some sort of oil-based liquid and set ablaze. Everything was reduced to ashes."

People began to mutter.

"Doesn't doing that suggest that they have something to hide…?" Hiromi Torigai said in her quiet voice.

"Hahahahahaha."

For some reason, Koufuu Hino began to laugh raucously.

"Do you have any ideas what it could be?"

"I have a theory, but as I have no proof, I'd like to present it last," Shisei Kaburagi said in an unusually solemn voice.

"I doubt they burned the corpses out of sanitation concerns. No doubt they were hiding the method of killing," my mother said.

Tomiko turned toward her with a motherly look. "That's something I don't understand… Recently, queerat technology has been advancing so rapidly that I think they must have some source of information."

"You mean a false minoshiro?"

"Yes. It's possible there are still a few Automotive Archives of the National Diet Library around. The queerats could have captured one and extracted its knowledge."

"If that's so, then isn't there a problem with policies we currently have regarding them? Making the subject of the false minoshiro's existence a taboo is pointless if they still exist. It only serves to postpone dealing with the issue. Have you even made an effort to destroy the remaining ones?" Kaburagi Shisei said sharply.

Although his harsh words weren't directed at me, they still made me shrink back instinctively.

"To destroy all the false minoshiro would be to wipe out the last remaining artifacts of human intellectual history. The Committee of Ethics has agreed that this would be a loss to us all," my mother replied calmly and firmly.

Tomiko added, "The Committee has indeed deliberated on this topic. The conclusion was that if a false minoshiro happened to be captured, so be it, but we should not purposely destroy them. This does not contradict our current policies. …Mizuho-chan, if the queerats managed to capture a false minoshiro, could they have found information on how to massacre the Giant Hornet colony?"

My mother thought for a moment. "…that knowledge would be under class four, subcategory three, which is forbidden to everyone."

"The Security Council meeting takes precedence over everything else. If we can't even discuss what we know, we won't be able to move forward with the agenda," Shisei Kaburagi snapped.

"We're not asking you to open up the archives to the public. Just tell us what you can remember. This is an emergency situation. …does there exist a way to destroy a colony so thoroughly?"

Even my mother couldn't continue to protest under Tomiko's persuasion.

"There were many weapons of mass destruction in the ancient civilization. Using one of these, it is possible to instantly annihilate a queerat army. But I can't think of a single one that could have been the weapon they used this time."

"Why is that?"

"For one, none of the weapons can be built as quickly as this was. They all require highly sophisticated scientific techniques and industrial equipment that the queerats don't have right now. Second, all the weapons that I know of leave some sort of trace when used."

"For example?"

My mother hesitated, but continued, "Nuclear weapons have the most power, but they would never have been able to find the materials needed to create one. Plus, if it had been used, the level of destruction would have been on the scale of the previous karma demon incident…" She glanced at me as if suddenly remembering I was there. "Anyway, since there was no residual radiation that comes from the detonation of a nuclear weapon, it couldn't have been what they used. The next most effective weapon is poison gas, but it is almost impossible for queerats to produce it."

"…but the Ground Spiders used poison gas before," I said without thinking.

"The types of gas I'm referring to aren't the kinds made from burning sulfur or plastic. Nerve gas, choking gas and the like could easily wipe out an entire town," she said in a slightly reproachful tone.

Of course, I wasn't a member of the Security Council, and had only been invited to the meeting in the event anyone had questions about queerats. Thankfully, no one seemed to mind that I had spoken out of turn.

"Similarly, biological weapons such as deadly viruses are difficult to make. They're also not as effective as the two I mentioned before. Apart from these, there are also weapons like earthquake generators and lasers that can cause mass destruction, but not even humans can make them now, not to mention queerats."

"So can we rule out all weapons from the past? Is there anything else you would like to add?" Tomiko asked gently, as if reading my mother's mind.

"…aren't supercluster bombs the only weapons that don't contradict the evidence found at the scene?" she said in a rush.

"What are those?"

"Like the bombs dropped from planes, but instead of just one large bomb, the inside is filled with hundreds of smaller bomblets. When the main bomb breaks open, the bomblets are scattered over a wide area. When those explode, they spread even smaller bomblets that are filled with metal pellets. Each of the smallest bomblets can cover an area about 20 meters in diameter, and tears everything in it to shreds. There's no crater left behind, and it could easily blow tens of thousands of queerats to pieces."

This wasn't the first time I had questioned the nature of the humans from the ancient civilization, but just hearing this made me nauseous. What exactly were they thinking when they developed weapons like these? Compared to the cold inhumanity of bombs, blowdogs could almost be considered cute.

"But is this something queerats are capable of making?" Shisei Kaburagi asked the question that was probably on everyone's mind.

"Of course they don't have the skills to manufacture new ones. …but it is possible that there are supercluster bombs and other weapons of destruction currently in existence," my mother said with a pained expression.

"You can't be serious."

The room was stunned into silence.

"It's been a thousand years since they were built, so it's almost certain they're unusable. …still, it's definitely possible that, if the queerats caught a false minoshiro and extracted information from it, they could unearth the weapons and restore them to working order."

"This is the first time I've heard of this," Tomiko said, brows furrowed.

"The information is passed down through the head librarians only."

"So, where are these weapons now?"

"That is the only question I cannot answer here," my mother said. "But I can say that it is not too far."

Everyone started talking at once. If the queerats did manage to acquire such a weapon, and if, against all odds, it was still working, then the district was in grave danger.

"Kill kill kill. Eheeheeheeheeheeheehee. Kill the eeevil ratsss," Koufuu Hino sang gleefully, rubbing his bald head.

"May I please have your attention. I would like to share my impression of the incident. I don't believe it was done by a bomb."

The room grew quiet once again.

"Shisei. Enough with the drama. What do you think it was?" Tomiko said, leaning forward.

"I will tell you, despite that insult. For, despite their attempts to destroy the evidence, I alone can tell. The Giant Hornet colony was wiped out by a human using their cantus."

Another silence filled the room as everyone was struck dumb with shock.

"Why…do you think that?"

"Everything on the battlefield had been turned to ash, but there was one thing, I noticed, that remained untouched. The arrows."

"What do arrows have to do with anything?"

"The Giant Hornet and Robber Fly colonies use two different types of arrows that are easily distinguishable from each other. There were a good number of Giant Hornet arrows left at the scene. And they were all completely undamaged."

"And?"

"If the arrows had hit something and bounced off to land on the ground, there would be obvious signs of damage to them. The only way they could be in perfect condition is if they had been stopped in midair by cantus."

If anyone other than Shisei Kaburagi had put forth this idea, no one would have believed them.

"Ah! So then…excuse me," Satoru hurriedly suppressed his excited shout.

"It doesn't matter. Continue," Tomiko said, looking kindly at him.

"Right. There was something I found odd when I was at the scene. None of the dead Giant Hornet soldiers were carrying weapons. Of course, the victors in a battle usually take their opponent's weapons, but they would also usually leave the broken ones behind. …but if their weapons had all been snatched away by cantus, that would explain it."

"B-but, there's no one in this town that would side with the Robber Flies and kill the Giant Hornets. And obviously no one on the Wildlife Protection or any other division in our department would do it," Mr. Kaneko said, sounding panicked.

"Yes. Of course, it is not anyone living here. Let me think…yes. Could it be another district?"

At Kaburagi Shisei's words, excited chatter arose once again, but Tomiko shook her head firmly.

"That's impossible. The closest districts to us are Shiroiroishi 71 in Tohoku, Tainai 84 in Hokuriku, and Koumi 95 in Chuubu. None of them would be stupid enough to try something like this."

"Tomiko has been in contact with these districts for years and has kept a close eye on them," Hiromi Torigai added in her quiet voice.

"Yes, I have been observing them for a very long time. Every district does the same. We all fear not knowing what is happening outside our borders. So the nine districts in the country gather to talk about the appearances of fiends and karma demons, as well as exchange other information deemed important for public safety. So I can promise you that the only thing every district cares about right now is sustaining a peaceful living environment."

"I see. Obviously, they gain no advantage by provoking anxiety in others," Shisei Kaburagi said casually, as if he had known this all along. "So now the possibilities are even fewer. If it isn't someone from our district, and it's not anyone from another district, then what about those that left our town in the past?"

My heart almost leapt out of my chest. He was talking about Maria and Mamoru.

"That is impossible," Tomiko said solemnly. "Those children are dead."

Lies, I thought. Tomiko was covering for them. If she wasn't…

"I have heard that we have received their remains. But that was two or three years after they went missing."

"Yes. So you should be clear about what happened."

Remains… My head was spinning from disbelief.

"But I am becoming suspicious of those too. Because the one who discovered and brought us the remains is none other than the one who I suspect is behind this atrocity. Yakomaru."

My mind snapped back into focus as I remembered the words Yakomaru had said twelve years ago.

"It might take a bit of time, but I believe we will be able to produce some bones. If those are presented to the committee, it might help the story."

"Some of our bones are visually similar to yours. An exceptionally tall queerat is about the same height as a young god. So, if we carefully scrape those bones against rocks…"

That's right. No doubt that's what happened. Yakomaru brought them the false bones. For a schemer like him, it would have been easy as pie. He cleverly manipulated queerat bones and…

"The bones are definitely real."

I wondered if I was mishearing. What was Tomiko saying?

"We examined them as thoroughly as possible. There is no doubt the bones are human. There were no inconsistencies in age or gender either. Their dental records from Harmony School put it beyond all possible doubt, but to be even more sure, we had the experts at the Lotus Farms confirm that the DNA matched as well."

No way. She was lying. I couldn't believe it. Maria couldn't have died. She just couldn't. Cold sweat ran down my back and my vision began to dim.

"I can say with absolute confidence that Maria Akizuki and Mamoru Itou are dead. They had nothing to do with this incident."

Tomiko's words resounded like the wrathful judgment from the god of death.

What happened after that? I can only remember vague images and fragments of conversation.

The meeting was in such disorder it took a while to reach a conclusion. There were debates on how we should find the person helping the Robber Flies, but the fates of the queerats seemed to have been decided from the start.

Throughout all this, I felt Satoru glancing anxiously over at me.

Hiromi Torigai suggested that the next week's Summer Festival be postponed until everything was settled, but the only reaction she got was pitying smiles from those who thought she was simply being her usual neurotic self.

In the end, the topic of how to search for the human traitor was left for next time. The committee unanimously agreed that Robber Fly colony and all its allies were to be exterminated even though we didn't fully understand the extent of their crimes yet.

Inui and four other members of the Wildlife Protection Division were introduced to enthusiastic applause. They were all veterans who had mastered the skills to efficiently wipe out tens of thousands of queerats in a short amount of time. It was fitting that the queerats called them gods of death.

After the Security Council meeting, I bid a quick goodbye to my parents and Satoru and left feeling sick to my stomach. I repeated Maria's name to myself as tears streamed down my face. But even as my mind was in such disarray, a small part remained surprisingly calm and kept asking the same questions over and over.

What had I expected these past twelve years? Did I actually believe that Maria and Mamoru would still be alive? And even if I said I did, was I just trying to deceive myself?

Maybe I had been slowly preparing myself over the years to face their deaths.

The sadness I had felt when I left the faceless boy was already more than I could bear. Now all I could do was wall off the part of my heart that contained all my pain, and let it quietly die in isolation.

There are quite a few annual festivals in Kamisu 66. In the spring there is the Planting Festival, Demon-Chasing Festival, and Illness-Dispelling Festival. In the summer, there's the Summer Festival, Fire Festival, and Spirit Festival. In the fall, the Harvest Festival and Labor Thanksgiving Festival. And in the winter, the Snow Festival, the New Year Festival, the Sagichou Fire Festival…

Out of all those, the one with the most ceremonial, and also most exciting one was the Summer Festival, also called the Monster Festival. The name makes it sound kind of scary, like everyone dresses up like monsters to scare each other, but it's not. Most of the dressing up involves festival committee members wearing straw hats and covering their faces to offer wine to festival-goers. In order to create the right atmosphere, the Summer Festival is always held on the night of a new moon. On that night, all the lights in the town are extinguished. The only illumination comes from the braziers and lanterns lining the canals and the occasional firework. Enveloped in darkness, the town is transformed into a stage for the next act.

But from another perspective, it is also a time when the district is completely isolated.

We are just one of the nine little districts scattered throughout the entire Japanese archipelago. Although we cling desperately to our "Japanese" identity, the truth is we had been completely cut off from several millennia of Japanese history. Kamisu 66 was just an island lost in time…

All of our festivals have been celebrated annually for over a century, but they are all just recreations based on texts and images from the ancient civilization. The Monster Festival originally came from a foreign land as well, but we revived it with carefully added components from other traditional celebrations.

Sometimes, I wonder. Are these borrowed and fake traditions, after being celebrated for hundreds of years, now considered real?

The canoe stopped right in front of a brazier, and I was temporarily blinded after being in the dark for so long. I swayed unsteadily on my wooden clogs.

With Satoru's help, I managed to disembark onto the dock.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

Suddenly, a memory from a Summer Festival over ten years ago swam into focus. Maria and I dancing around delightedly in our new yukata.

"Our yukata match!"

"Yeah, we're twins!"

I still remember what they looked like. Mine was blue with white dots and red goldfish, and Maria's was white with blue dots and red goldfish.

She spun gracefully in her clogs. Her movements were so beautiful that I could only stare.

"Let's go!"

"But if we're not careful, we'll get caught by the monsters."

"It'll be okay. We can use the magic words."

"What magic words?"

"The moms were talking about it the other day. It's called a mantra. I'll teach you."

Since we didn't have cantus yet, the world appeared full of wonder and danger. But we firmly believed that once we were grown up and had our powers, nothing in the world would frighten us.

Maria ran off ahead. As I watched her retreating figure, I suddenly felt helplessly lost, and reached out, shouting her name…

"-ki. Saki?"

Satoru's voice brought me back to the present.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just spaced out for a moment."

"Oh. …let's go that way. There's some sort of show going on there."

I took his hand and started clip-clopping down the street in my clogs.

Although the wide streets lining the canals were brightly lit with braziers, blackness extended into the distance on either side of us. It was as if we were walking on a bridge suspended above the land of the dead. The illuminated path was safe, but if we ventured off into the darkness, we would never be able to return.

As far as I can remember, I had never missed the Summer Festival, and I've experienced this strange feeling each time.

Along the path were other people heading to the festival. Everyone was wearing yukata and clogs, and holding paper fans. Happy sounds of talk and laughter echoed all around, but to me they just seemed as meaningless as the rustling of the wind.

I saw the monsters ahead. Both wore straw hats and had covered faces, and one wore a tengu mask that completely hid their identity.

The two monsters offered the passersby wine. We took the paper cups and drank the wine in one swallow. It was sweet sake. I began to feel a little tipsy just from that.

"Look, the lanterns are coming."

He pointed at the clusters of lanterns being carried on long poles. In the ancient civilization, each pole was carried by one person, but the ones we had now weighed over a ton, making that impossible. Every summer, each of the seven towns design and build their own lantern, but Withertree had not participated since the disaster twelve years ago, so Hayring usually built two lanterns to make up for it. This year, the town of Withertree was making a comeback, and there were eight lanterns in all.

The giant lanterns came slowly down the path. The one right before me was from my own town of Waterwheel. The lanterns were decorated with pictures of various waterwheels. Overshot, backshot, undershot, breastshot…

A number of monsters ran behind the lanterns. They were all short, almost child-sized. All wore hats and animal masks instead of the usual cloth masks.

"Look, the child-monsters." I pointed, but they had already run out of Satoru's sight.

"Children? Weird, since when did they have children dressing as monsters?"

"But they just went by. Over there."

A loud bang announced the arrival of the first fireworks of the night. A brilliant flower of light bloomed in the dark sky. Then came the second, and the third. The colors and shapes reminded me of chrysanthemums and peonies. A cheer went up a twinkling golden lights fell like cherry blossoms. These were done with pure pyrotechnical skills, no cantus involved.

"…beautiful," I whispered.

"Yeah." Satoru put his arms gently around my shoulders.

Following the fireworks, a traditional band struck up a tune that echoed all around us. The unique sounds of the flute, drums, and gong brought forth the heady ambience of the Summer Festival.

What was I doing here?

I asked myself this as we continued to walk.

It hadn't even been a week since I learned of Maria's death. In that time, I had kept myself busy with work and the festival had hardly crossed my mind.

Still, everyone attended the Summer Festival. Apart from those who were sick or looking after children at the day-care centers, no one shut themselves in on this day. I couldn't bear the thought of spending this time alone.

There was another reason I had accepted Satoru's invitation to the festival. The seasonal festivals in Kamisu 66 all followed a theme. For example, the Demon-Chasing, Planting, and Illness-Dispelling Festivals during the spring dealt with plentiful harvest and health. The summer festivals were to worship our ancestors and pray for happiness in the next world. In other words, this was the night when the worlds of the dead and the living were in close proximity.

If Maria wanted to see me again, I was sure she would show herself somewhere at the festival. That subconscious thought was probably the reason I decided to come.

As I got closer to the open square that was the center of the festival, the performance tower and stage decked out in red and white banners came into view. Although there was still some time before the main event, most people were already tipsy on wine and having fun catching goldfish or throwing darts at the game booths. These games were difficult without cantus, but there was an unsaid agreement among everyone not to use our powers on this night. The performers and lantern bearers were the only exceptions.

"Hey wait, I want to get some cotton candy," Satoru said as he headed toward a booth.

I looked around aimlessly and spotted a little girl wearing a yukata.

Maria… It couldn't be. I blinked. But her red hair pinned by a silver barrette looked just like Maria's when she was young. Even her yukata, white with blue dots and red goldfish, looked exactly like the one she used to wear.

I walked slowly toward the girl. But when I was about four or five meters away, she suddenly took off running.

"Wait!" I shouted, and started chasing after her.

She ran away from the festival center and toward the darkened canals.

"Maria!"

I ran as fast as I could, but in my haste and unfamiliarity with wearing clogs, nearly tripped over. I caught myself with cantus and looked up, but the girl was already gone.

"Saki! What's wrong?" Satoru's voice came breathlessly from behind.

"Sorry. It was nothing." I turned to face him.

"Nothing? Then why did you suddenly take off like that?"

"I…"

I couldn't say I was chasing after a hallucination. Now that I looked, I had run much farther than I thought, and the area around me was mostly deserted.

"You just shouted 'Maria!' didn't you?"

"You heard?"

"Yeah. Did you see her?"

I looked silently up at the pitch-black sky. In addition to being the night of a new moon, the stars were obscured by a thick layer of cloud.

"…I don't know. It might have only been a kid who looked a lot like her."

Still, even just looking at her from behind, the similarities were too precise to be coincidence. But if Maria had wanted to meet me, why did she run away? It was almost as if she were leading me here.

There was a faint buzzing by my ear. I jumped away from it instinctively.

"A mosquito," Satoru said, sounding disconcerted.

Spotting it in the light of a brazier, he flicked it away with a twanging sound.

"Why is there a mosquito here?"

Usually, there are no flies or mosquitoes inside the Holy Barrier. Especially not mosquitoes, since everyone hated the thought of having their blood sucked and killed them on sight.

"Maybe it came in when someone headed out into the mountains."

"On the night of the festival?"

Were there people who got drunk enough to go wandering outside the Holy Barrier on this night?

"Um, or maybe Inui and his team are back."

A week ago, the Wildlife Preservation officers had set out with the grand goal of killing two hundred thousand members of the Robber Fly colony within three days. But it hadn't happened. Yakomaru's entire army had vanished, as if they had sensed that the gods of death were coming after them and gone into hiding.

"Could that be it…"

After my experience in summer camp, I knew that sleeping out in the open, eating rationed meals and whatever could be scrounged up in the forest was extremely tough. So they might have come back into town to restock and recharge. But I also got the feeling that Inui's team wasn't the type to leave a mission incomplete.

"Well, let's go back. The firedrawing contest is about to start."

Firedrawing was using cantus to create beautiful pictures out of fireworks shot into the sky. Every year, the most powerful cantus users competed against each other to the wild cheers of the watching crowd. It was the highlight of the Summer Festival.

"Okay…"

Thinking back on it now, I still don't know why I turned to look behind me. It was as if someone was controlling me. What I saw made my blood run cold.

"Saki, what's wrong?" he asked, sounding perplexed.

"Over there…!" I pointed toward the canal with a trembling finger.

"What? I don't see anything."

It had only been for the merest second. But I had seen it, clear as day.

"They were standing there. Maria, Mamoru, and the faceless boy…"

The three of them had been standing on the surface of the water, looking intently at us from a distant world. It was a perfect depiction of the phrase "passing from this world to the next".

"Saki." Satoru held me in his arms. "…I feel the same way. I want to meet them again if I can, even if they're just ghosts."

"I'm not imagining it. Trust me."

"I know. You saw them. But you were expecting to see them before we even got here, right? You can try to hide it, but I already know."

"How?"

"Your yukata. It's so dark and plain it almost makes me look gaudy by comparison."

His yukata was also dark blue, but with pale stripes.

"You look like you're in mourning."

He had hit the nail on the head, and I couldn't respond.

"It's okay. You truly wanted to meet them, right? That thought was so strong your mind projected their image on the water."

"…yeah."

I guess there was no other way to look at it. But then who was the little girl who had led me here, away from the festival?

For a while we stood there, unmoving, his arms around me. Satoru seemed to be waiting for me to calm down.

I looked past his shoulder toward the festival grounds. It looked as it always did, full of light and people. There was already a crowd waiting for the firedrawing contest to begin.

But the monsters were still offering wine. The little monsters with covered faces. They had to be children, right?

It wasn't until a man who had downed a cup of wine in one gulp suddenly collapsed on the ground that I realized something was horribly wrong.

"Satoru!"

The monsters scattered at my shout.

"Saki? What's wrong?"

He probably thought I was freaking out over nothing again and hugged me even tighter.

"No! Let go! That guy just passed out! Over there!"

Satoru finally let go and turned around.

"What happened?" he gasped.

"He drank the wine the monster gave him and…"

I ran over to the fallen man. He had been foaming at the mouth and writhing in pain just a second ago, but was now completely still.

"He's dead. …he wasn't sick or anything. It was poison," Satoru said after smelling the man's mouth.

"Poison? But, who…?"

"Didn't you say it was the child-monster?"

"Yeah."

The fear in his face scared me.

"No human could have done this. It was a queerat."

"Queerats? That's impossible. They could never openly revolt against humans; they know that would be the end for them!"

"The must have somehow found out that they were about to be exterminated and decided to launch one last attack."

"So the Robber Flies…"

The image of Yakomaru's face appeared in my mind–his glib tongue and cunning, beady eyes.

"Let's go! We have to warn everyone."

As we took off running, the sky was filled with bursts of light and sound. One. Two. Three. The peonies and chrysanthemums were transformed into swirls of color, spinning like windmills in dazzling, complicated patterns.

A great cheer rose from the spectators. The firedrawing contest had begun. No matter how loudly we shouted now, no one would hear us.

I couldn't levitate like Maria. But if I didn't find a way to get above the crowd, we were all going to die here.

Suddenly, there was a thunderous roar that shook the earth itself. It wasn't a firework going off. The sound was loud enough to break windows.

Deafening shrieks came from the crowd.

Satoru grabbed me by the shoulder and yanked me back.

"Run!"

"But…we have to warn-!"

"It's to late for that. They've already started attacking. There's nothing we can do."

I backed away, ignoring his overly calm assessment of the situation.

"Everyone at the square…"

"It's okay. All the powerful cantus users are there. The queerats won't be able to do anything."

I felt better at his words. No matter how you look at it, cantus-wielding humans could easily defeat the queerats and their primitive weapons.

We ran away from the square, but less than a hundred meters later, I felt a peculiar prickling on my scalp. Looking up, I could tell that the sky was filled with streaking arrows, but all I could actually see were faint silhouettes. It was as if they were painted completely black.

Next, hundreds of arquebuses fired simultaneously. Angry roars and shrieks of pain rose in an overwhelming cacophony. I sank to the ground and covered my ears. The townspeople were being killed by the queerats… I couldn't think of a single thing I could do.

"Get up! Run!" Satoru grabbed my wrist and started dragging me away.

Then, faint sounds came from our escape path. A clanging sound of metal on metal. The sounds of muffled footfalls came closer and closer.

Queerats… I froze and held my breath. Satoru put in finger in front of his lips and gestured with his hands.

They came. More than I had imagined. Two or three hundred of them, moving ponderously with their bodies low to the ground.

Two strokes of luck saved us from being spotted instantly by the queerats. First, we were downwind. If we hadn't been, they would definitely have noticed us with their sharp sense of smell. Second, we were both wearing dark clothing that blended in with the surroundings and made us hard to spot at a glance.

In that small window of opportunity, he killed them.

The queerats at the center of the formation burst into flames.

Piercing screams cut through the air and the other soldiers froze, their shocked faces lit by the fire.

"Go to hell!" Satoru snarled.

The flames spread swiftly from one soldier to the next like a chain of firecrackers. It took less than a minute for two hundred or so queerats to turn into bloody red lumps of flesh. All were too afraid to try to counterattack or escape.

"Bastards…!" Satoru viciously crushed the burnt remnants of the queerats. Blood sprayed through the air and bones snapped loudly.

"Stop already." I tried to hold him back.

"Low-lifes, maggots…how dare you kill humans!"

Satoru didn't seem to hear me at all.

I remembered the last time he was like this. We had been trapped underground after the Ground Spiders attacked. When he regained his cantus and we started to counterattack… Satoru was only a twelve year-old boy at the time, but it was as if I had seen a glimpse of the fiend in him. The memory made me break out in a cold sweat.

Right now, his face was hidden in shadow, but I have no doubt he was wearing the same expression he had back then. A strange mixture of unstoppable anger and bloodlust…

"They're dead already. We'll be in danger if we don't get out of here!"

Finally, Satoru seemed to calm down. "Right, let's go."

We had only gone a couple steps when he stopped again.

"What?"

"The group I just killed isn't the one that's attacking at the square. These guys were here to ambush the people who tried to escape. With these numbers, it's likely they were just the vanguard and there are more coming. So if we run this way, we'll probably meet even more queerats. It'll be dangerous, but our best bet is to go back toward the square."

"But…"

"It's okay. Some might have died in the surprise attack, but humans won't be killed that easily. We might be gaining the upper hand already."

His prediction was right on the mark.

The queerats' strategy, a blitz attack in the middle of the night, was likely more intended scare us than do any real damage.

First, they dress up as monsters and offer normal wine with cups of poisoned wine mixed in so as to sow the first seeds of panic when people started dropping dead at random.

Then by timing their guns with the bursts of fireworks, they create an even greater disturbance over a larger area.

When people start trying to escape, they start shooting camouflaged arrows to herd them into a central area, sowing even more chaos and making it difficult to use cantus. Once everyone was stuck in one place, they could kill us like shooting fish in a barrel.

Yakomaru's plan had been carried out flawlessly up until now. But two people, with cantus so powerful as to rival the gods themselves, turned the tide of the battle.

The queerats' attacks had killed over two hundred people. The two thousand or so who still lived were in a state of panic that bordered dangerously on becoming mass mayhem, but calm was restored with a few words written across the sky. Incidentally, no one else has ever figured out how to write glowing words in the sky without the use of fireworks.

Following instructions, the crowd gathered into a circle about sixteen meters across and sealed their cantus to prevent interference. The only reason everyone responded so readily to these commands was that we had absolute faith in Shisei Kaburagi.

Inside the circular formation, everyone was protected from all attacks, much like the magical barriers often described in fairy tales. Be it arrows or bullets, they were all deflected by an invisible field.

As Satoru and I returned to the square, we were astonished at the speed and ease with which Shisei Kaburagi used his powers to defend us.

Their attacks nullified, the queerat army was brought to a standstill. Koufuu Hino sauntered lazily up to them.

"Heeheeheeheeheeheeheehee. Well that's just too bad. Looks like there's nothing you can do," he said in a strange, singsong voice as he tapped his bald head with a folding fan. "Bad little rats, you betrayed us. What should I do? Rip out your tongues, and turn you inside out. String you up, turn you into jerky. Bad little rats that rebelled against humans. How should I punish you? Snap your bones, stretch you out, and pound you into patties."

People began to clap. They all wished to see this cruel revenge. Koufuu Hino raised a hand to acknowledge the crowd. When he turned back to the queerats, his entire face had changed. His eyes bulged from his head like ping-pong balls and he howled in a frightening voice.

"Now then, you eeevil, murderous rats, what shall I do with you?"

Koufuu Hino then began to shriek in queerat language. It appeared he was translating what he had just said. In any other situation, the sight of a fat man squeaking in such a high pitch that his cheeks trembled would have been hilarious.

"Upwind…it can't be!" Satoru muttered suddenly.

"What?"

"I thought it was weird that they would be traveling upwind. Being downwind should be more advantageous. In that case…this is bad!" he shouted at Koufuu Hino. "Poison gas! Watch out! They're spreading poison gas in our direction!"

Koufuu Hino turned his bulging eyes in our direction, then nodded complacently.

"I see, I see. Thanks for letting me know, kid. I see, I see. It seems they're not total idiots after all."

There was a sudden strange smell. It wasn't sulfurous like the gas the Ground Spiders used, but something sharp and acrid that made my eyes burn.

This was the real trap. The depth of Yakomaru's cunning sent chills up my spine. He had a plan within a plan within a plan. The blitz attack was meant to fail from the very beginning.

And no one had thought that he would sacrifice his own troops to the poison gas.

3

We watched with bated breath. What would these two cantus masters do about the poison gas?

Nothing. Koufuu Hino's bulging eyes returned to normal and he fanned himself lazily while Shisei Kaburagi stood motionless with his arms crossed.

"The wind…"

Satoru was the first to notice. The breeze that had been blowing until a moment ago died down. The acrid smell was disappearing.

The breeze started again. A soft, barely perceptible breath of air blowing in the opposite direction.

The wind grew stronger until it felt almost like a gale.

"I can't believe it. …they reversed the direction of the wind," I whispered incredulously.

I couldn't imagine that either of them had the power to do it.

"Seriously. I would never be able to do this."

Satoru seemed thoroughly impressed as well. He himself had created a tornado to sweep away the poison gas the Ground Spiders used, but the area had been windless at the time, and he had only moved the air in a limited space.

At night, the wind came down from the mountains, across the plains and toward the sea. It might feel like just a gentle breeze, but it was part of a much larger pressure system. Reversing it would take an absurd amount of energy, and I couldn't even begin to imagine what sort of mental image was used to do it.

We still couldn't see the queerat troop hiding what used to be upwind, but sounds of panic and cries of pain drifted over to us. That was only to be expected. After all, they were suddenly being choked by their own poison gas.

"Ufufufufufufu," Koufuu Hino chuckled unpleasantly. "Silly fools. No, even fools could do better. Did you actually think you could kill us, the gods among gods, with such a pitiful strategy?"

His bald head turned as red as a boiled octopus and he fanned himself rapidly. A lewd smile played about his thick lips and he licked them incessantly.

"Now then, let's have some fun. Foolish little rats, what shall I do with you? Eheeheeheeheeheehee. …won't you come and play?"

The first wave of queerats had numbered four or five thousand. They stood silently in front of Koufuu Hino, then in one mechanical motion, divided neatly into two groups.

For a moment, I thought they were about to attack, but something didn't seem right. The queerats stood as still as statues. One group turned, not toward us, but toward the second group of queerats, and readied their guns.

"How 'bout it Kaburagi-chan? Pick a side." Koufuu Hino's voice had a hysterical edge to it. "You can even choose first."

Shisei Kaburagi shook his head, arms still crossed. "No thanks."

"Eeeh, that's too bad. It's boring playing by myself, but I guess I don't have a choice. Well, let's get started."

Koufuu Hino took a deep breath and clapped his hands together. The sound echoed loudly around the square.

"Aaaiaiaiaiaiai!"

He clapped to a beat, and his eyes bulged out once again.

"Aaara! Essasaaa!" he yelled thunderously.

All at once, the second group of queerats attacked the first.

"I don't believe this. How the hell is he doing it…?" Satoru said, sounding dumbstruck.

Using cantus to control a living being was extremely difficult. Simply inducing emotions like fear or anger required considerable skill; making someone perform complex movements required a complete image of the target's brain. Only someone with an exceptional level of concentration and imagination could pull it off.

Koufuu Hino was controlling upwards of two thousand queerats. To be able to manipulate such a great number of highly intelligent creatures didn't seem to be humanly possible. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that his powers were almost godlike.

The controlled queerats moved like wind-up toys, attacking with horrific speed. The other group fought desperately, but they seemed unable to recover from the terror of seeing their friends being turned into brainless killing machines.

I suddenly remembered that Satoru had used the same tactic once. He had controlled queerat corpses to frighten the deeply superstitious Ground Spiders. Of course, the actual skill involved in doing that was nowhere near Koufuu Hino's level, but the end result was probably just as effective.

"Smash, smash, smash your brain. When the soldiers come, slam the door. Once they're gone, take a breath. Naked mice, scurry, squeak. Squeak, squeak, squeak."[*]

[*] He's singing a twisted version of a children's song called Zui Zui Zukkorobashi. There aren't any official translations of it, but the part that corresponds to what he's singing goes, "Smash, smash, smashing sesame miso. When the soldiers come, slam the door. Once they're gone, take a breath. Little mice eating from bags of rice. Squeak, squeak, squeak."

He pounded the drum hanging from the tower and sang at the top of his lungs. The queerats slashed with their knives, blood and severed heads flying through the air. I could barely look at the ghastly sight.

"Ah…" Satoru said, staring transfixed at the bloody slaughter.

"What?"

"The controlled queerats are all moving the same way…"

Although he was a good distance away, Koufuu Hino heard and stuck out his tongue at us. There was a nasty look in his bulbous eyes.

"Oh ho. I've been found out. Fail. My trick's been revealed."

I finally saw it. Most of them were indeed doing the same thing. Some were even firing at empty space. There were probably only about ten different movement patterns being used.

"I'd love to show you that I can control each one individually, but with so many of them, it's a pain in the ass. Plus I'm kinda drunk…"

The queerats continued attacking without pause even as Koufuu Hino rambled on incoherently.

"Uheeheehee. Even if they want to run, my queerats won't spare them. But even with me controlling them, victory isn't guaranteed. I'll be pissed if people think this is all I, Koufuu, am capable of. So let's kick it up a notch!"

The controlled queerats began to attack with such speed that their wild, flailing movements ripped their own joints from their sockets.

"Eehheeheeheeheeheeheehee….!"

Koufuu Hino's high, hysterical laughter rose above the stinking mist of blood spreading throughout the square.

We were so spellbound by the sight of the bloody massacre that we completely let our guard down. The combination of intense anger and hatred toward the queerats, and exaltation of being freed from our fear, was undoubtedly one of the reasons for our abnormal state of mind.

It might sound ridiculous, but it's possible that even this was part of Yakomaru's plan. If it weren't, then what happened next would have to be the result of unbelievably good timing.

With only a third of the two thousand queerat soldiers left, it seemed victory was at hand. Then came a sudden, deafening blast.

Ten more blasts followed. Then one final explosion so powerful it made the ground shake.

I couldn't understand what was going on. Neither could anyone else, I suspect.

Later, testimonies by survivors painted a hazy picture of what had happened.

As we had been busy watching the slaughter, a couple of queerats that had been waiting for just this moment let off a volley of shots simultaneously. They had two targets. Koufuu Hino and Shisei Kaburagi.

We had all vaguely assumed that the queerats wanted to kill as many humans as possible. We thought their attacks were nothing more than the desperate struggles of a cornered animal hoping to wound its predator even as it died. But Yakomaru had plotted for victory from the very beginning. And the crux of his strategy was to take the lives of Koufuu Hino and Shisei Kaburagi.

Three of the shots had hit Koufuu Hino. One had gone straight through his thick chest. He slowly sank to the ground.

At the same time, four soldiers quickly surrounded Shisei Kaburagi and blasted him with shots. The smoke from the gunpowder was so thick, he was completely obscured. Two queerats took the opportunity to rush in close. They were wrapped in bombs and caltrops, and once they were in point-blank range, blew themselves up.

How did they manage to get so close so quickly? Everyone wondered the same thing. The answer was simple. They were nearby all along. Inside the circular area protected by Shisei Kaburagi.

Everyone must have been dumbstruck at the sight of gun-wielding queerats appearing in their midst. Because at first glance, they appeared totally human.

But if you looked closely, there were visible differences. Their faces had no hair, eyebrows, or eyelashes, and their bleached skin were as wrinkled as a hundred year-old man's. You could even see a glimpse of their yellow front teeth under their lips.

If the Ground Spider queen could control the types of offspring she had to create mutants like blowdogs and leaf-fighters, then it wasn't out of the question to give birth to queerats that could pass for humans.

The false humans' camouflage had two effects. The first was the ability to blend into a crowd. In normal situations, their appearances were strange enough that they might be noticed. But during a surprise attack, no one was going to be paying close attention.

The second effect could be seen in the queerat snipers. Any figure that resembled a queerat would be instantly killed with cantus. But in the dark, at a distance, the false humans triggered our attack control mechanism, making it impossible to use our powers. Even Shisei Kaburagi was no exception. They must have thought that with the combination of false human suicide bombers and snipers, even the most god-like human would not survive.

And yet, the explosion was cut off. When the smoke cleared, there stood Shisei Kaburagi.

On either side of him were two strange spheres, two or three meters across, and clear like a soap bubble. Smoke and fire whirled inside of them.

He had managed to contain both blasts. It was like the time Satoru had suppressed the blowdog explosion, except this was perfectly sealed.

Shisei Kaburagi's gaze traveled over the fallen Koufuu Hino. His expression didn't change, but an aura of burning rage radiated from him.

"I will deal with this. Everyone, please suppress your cantus," he said calmly, though the terrible force of his anger was still palpable.

He removed his sunglasses.

A silent stir rippled through the crowd. Very few people had ever seen Shisei Kaburagi's face.

He had large, almond-shaped eyes that shone with a clear light. Now that his entire face was revealed, he looked almost handsome. Except for his strange irises.

There were two pupils in each eye, each surrounded by a golden iris that glittered in the darkness. This was a genetic trait passed down through the Kaburagi bloodline, and was said to be proof of the family's extraordinary powers.

Speaking of names, Shisei's true name was 四星. 肆 was an alternate form of 四, and it had the added meaning of 'to kill'.*

"Filth," Shisei Kaburagi said in a low voice.

Two holes appeared in the bubbles holding the pent-up explosion. The suppressed energy shot directly at the two remaining false human queerats.

The caltrops tore through them at such high speed that their torsos were instantly vaporized. The remnants of their bodies hit the ground with a thud.

Shisei Kaburagi turned his terrible gaze upon the crowd. Everyone stood rooted to the spot, not even daring to breathe.

Suddenly, about a dozen people were lifted into the air. Looking at the suspended, struggling forms, I realized that they were all false humans.

"Did you think you could deceive me?"

The queerats were catapulted out into the darkness at supersonic speeds like ricocheting pachinko balls.

"Watch out!" I shouted.

The few soldiers that had survived Koufuu Hino's slaughter had gathered up their remaining ammunition and were sneaking up behind Shisei Kaburagi to launch one final attack.

Shisei Kaburagi didn't even bother to turn around.

The air seemed to thicken as the arrows and bullets flew toward him, and they slowly came to a stop.

He turned, almost lazily, and looked at the queerats with his four-pupiled eyes.

In a flash so bright I thought my retinas would burn off, the remaining six hundred or so soldiers evaporated. All that remained was a thick mist. A second later a burning wind swept over us. If I hadn't used my cantus to protect my face just in time, I would've been blistered by the heat.

Shisei Kaburagi walked slowly toward Koufuu Hino. The arrows and bullets clattered to the ground behind him.

"Koufuu. Hold on."

As Shisei Kaburagi lifted him up, Koufuu Hino opened his eyes and coughed up a lungful of blood.

"I can't believe it. Those l-little rats actually got me…"

"I'm sorry. I was careless."

Koufuu Hino didn't seem to hear him.

"Why were the children of god given such…frail bodies…"

Satoru and I began to run toward him to help, but Shisei Kaburagi shook his head slowly.

"The artist in me…is losing its flame…what a waste," he continued to whisper incoherently. "May I leave beauty in my wake…"

Those were his last words. A faint glowing image lit the darkness. It was a young woman. I watched with bated breath. She stood naked in a field bathed in the light of a setting sun, smiling gently at us. Even now, I don't think I've ever seen anything more beautiful.

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*四星 means 'four stars'

Just as I was wondering who she was, the image slowly faded away into the darkness.

Koufuu Hino, wielder of the most powerful cantus, had passed from this world.

Shisei Kaburagi put on his sunglasses and stood up.

"Everyone, please stay calm. The immediate danger has passed. Are members of the Security Council present?"

There was movement in the crowd. First to stumble forward was Mr. Kaneko. His face was deathly pale and shock seemed to have rendered him speechless. Next came my parents, and a wave of relief washed over me. I was certain they had survived, but seeing it for myself brought tears to my eyes. I ran forward and embraced them.

Behind them, I saw Tomiko walking calmly toward us.

"How's Koufuu?"

"He's gone," Shisei Kaburagi said.

"I see… Every queerat that was even marginally involved with this will be exterminated. All others are considered suspects until further notice."

"Of course."

"I never thought this would actually happen," Tomiko said in a harsh voice.

"That Yakomaru. Do not underestimate his intelligence or the extent of his plans. Doing so was what killed Koufuu, powerful as he was. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Please don't worry. Attacks are useless against me."

"True. You have a 360 degree field of vision with no blind spots, and can even see through objects used for cover. Your reflexes surpass the highest limits of normal nerve cells. Even I can't think of a way to bring you down. …still, I can't help but feel uneasy."

My parents started giving instructions to the members of the Security Council to deal with the situation. My father, in his capacity as mayor, began giving brisk orders left and right.

"The injured who require medical care, come this way. Are there any doctors or nurses here?"

I suddenly realized someone was missing.

"Um, where's Hiromi Torigai?" I asked Tomiko.

She grimaced slightly and shook her head.

"Huh?"

"She was always the most worried and cautious one. For all that trouble, she was killed instantly by a bullet to the head. It's really unfortunate. Remember, she was the only one to suggest postponing the Summer Festival at the Safety Council meeting," Tomiko said quietly in a surprisingly calm voice. "I can't remember feeling this much hatred for anything since that fiend, K. These despicable queerats, especially Yakomaru, are going to pay for what they've done. I vow to subject him to agony no living being has ever suffered as he dies a slow, protracted death."

Then she gave a cheerful smile and started gathering members of the Ethics Committee for a conference.

Shisei Kaburagi called over the crowd, "Everyone, please remember your disaster response training. Form your groups of five and assess everyone's health. If your group is missing members, join with another group. Never walk with less than five. …patrol the village in your groups and

conduct a thorough search for any remaining queerats. Even if they claim to be loyal to humans and beg for their lives to be spared, kill them on sight. Be thorough, destroy their hearts or snap their necks to ensure death. Each member keeps watch in one direction, and make sure there are no blind spots above or below."

Satoru took my arm. "Let's go."

"Huh?"

"We're the only two surviving members of our group from Sage Academy, so we have to join up with another incomplete group."

"Yeah. What are you thinking about?"

"I don't know. But my anxiety is gnawing away at me."

He didn't say more than that.

We quickly found three people and joined with them at Satoru's suggestion. They were from the metallurgy plant. Fujita, the leader, was a middle-aged man, Kuramochi was a thirty-something year old man who was also a firefighter in his town, and Okano was a lady about two or three years older than us. One of their group members was in the hospital and hadn't come to the festival, and the other had died from the poison gas attack. The three of them were full of grief and anger. Kuramochi showed signs of wanting to take revenge on the queerats, and Okano wept openly for the friends she had lost in the attack. Both were worried about their sick friend, so we headed to the hospital.

"Saki, be careful," my mother said through tears as she hugged me tight before we parted.

"Even if you have cantus, it's still dangerous if the five of you get separated. Do not drift from the pack, do you hear me?" my father warned over and over.

"Okay, I'll be fine," I said cheerfully.

But there was a nagging feeling of unease that I just couldn't put my finger on.

The only hospital with wards for patients to stay in was in the town of Gold, separated from the center of the district. It was surrounded by paddy fields, where year after year, bright green shoots slowly turned into golden sheaves of rice.

We boarded a small boat and set off down the pitch-black waterway. Everyone was dying to reach the hospital as soon as possible, but for safety's sake, we had to move slowly. It was maddening. Since there was always the possibility of being ambushed in the dark, we sent an empty canoe ahead of us as decoy, but there was no guarantee the queerats would fall for the trap.

"Hey, what's that thing you're worried about? Can you talk about it now?"

Satoru spoke quietly, aware that the others would be listening. "Yeah. Something doesn't add up."

"What?"

"First of all, why would Yakomaru fight a war he has no chance of winning? You know how he is. He wouldn't take a risk if he wasn't absolutely sure he'd come out on top."

"You guys know Yakomaru?"

Fujita, who was on lookout at the bow, stood and came over.

"Yes. We met him when he was still called Squealer."

Satoru quickly summarized the summer camp incident.

"I see. It's true that he's exceptionally cunning, but still, I just don't believe the queerats can win this. They probably bet everything they had on tonight's attack."

"That's what I thought too…"

I got the feeling there was something Satoru wasn't saying.

"Earlier, when we were heading to the square, we ran into another queerat troop. I killed them."

"Did you? Good job."

"Yeah, but when I checked the tattoos in the corpses, they weren't the Robber Fly colony's."

"It wasn't?"

I gaped. I was supposed to be the expert in queerats, and I hadn't even noticed. That was mortifying.

"It said 'Other'. That's the Spider Wasp's tattoo."*

"Spider Wasp? That's the colony the Robber Flies attacked, isn't it? I heard the Spider Wasps went over to their side for some reason," Kuramochi, who had been listening carefully while steering the boat, said sharply.

Most people had already heard about this.

"Yes, and that's the big mystery. I can't figure out why they would do that."

"Hm. What's your theory?" Fujita asked.

"…the Spider Wasps must have believed the Robber Flies were sure to win. So in order to ensure their own survival, they betrayed the Giant Hornets."

"As I thought, they did believe there was a chance of wining. But it looks like they overestimated the Robber Flies. …still, it must have sounded like a convincing plan," Fujita smiled slightly and shook his head. "There's one other thing that bothers me. The fact that the Robber Flies did manage to annihilate the Giant Hornets. Kiroumaru is an experienced commander and his soldiers are the best of the best. How were they defeated so easily? I don't think a surprise attack like tonight's would have as much of an impact on a queerat army." His smile faded.

"So you think they still have an ace up their sleeve?" I asked Satoru.

"Yeah. Though I don't know what it is yet. It might be a weapon of mass destruction from the past, as your mother said," his voice trailed off.

"But Shisei Kaburagi said…"

He had said that it was a cantus user that had destroyed the Giant Hornet colony.

"Yeah," Satoru said, his expression warning me not to speak further.

If the other three found out about that, it would only cause them to panic.

"…alright. They might have weapons stronger than guns and arrows, so everyone needs to be careful," Fujita said thoughtfully.

"Ridiculous. There aren't any weapons that can overpower cantus. It'll be a walk in the park when we decide to attack," Kuramochi snapped. "I'll find those bastards, even if I have to knock down every building here. I won't rest until I slaughter all the queerats that killed Nemoto!"

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* The first kanji in Spider Wasp, 蠍, is pronounced "betsu", but they used a simpler character with the same pronunciation for the tattoo, which happens to mean 'other'

"I know how you feel, but calm down. They've had a lot of time to prepare. We'll be caught with our pants down if we're not careful," Fujita said.

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

Kuramochi turned away. The boat swayed from side to side, as if channeling the conflicting feelings within him.

Okano, who had been silent until now, looked up.

"I…I want to kill every last one of those fiends. But I'm more worried about Oouchi right now."

"I know. But I'm sure he's fine. There are fifty or sixty people in the hospital. They might be sick, but they can still use their powers. The queerats wouldn't stand a chance," Fujita said encouragingly.

"Yeah…you're right," Okano murmured to herself.

"It'll be okay. Don't worry." I squeezed her shoulder.

She trembled slightly. I patted her comfortingly. I wondered if Oouchi was her lover. I remembered when I had comforted Maria like this long ago, and my heart ached.

The decoy boat arrived first at the dock, and we stopped behind it. Between here and the hospital was a narrow canal surrounded on both sides by rice paddies. Queerats could be hiding among the plants, or submerged in the mud. Crossing would be dangerous.

"Look there," Satoru whispered, pointing at the hospital.

The windows of all three floors of the building were dark, and there wasn't a sound to be heard. There was a black void where the front entrance would have been. The door appeared to have been left open, but looking closer, I saw that some of the wooden planks that made up the wall had been ripped out.

"What is that? Is the door broken?"

"Yeah. It's just a huge hole."

"That can't be…!" Okano said, her voice rising.

Fujita clapped a hand over her mouth.

"…shh. It's okay. Even if something did happen, they probably managed to escape. Let's go check it out first."

The two boats advanced as quietly as possible. Satoru, Fujita, and I scanned the paddies for any signs of an attack. My heart was beating so hard I was sure everyone could hear it. My palms were dripping with sweat and I kept wiping them on my yukata.

We arrived at the front of the hospital. Part of the entrance had been completely destroyed. What was left was a neat, circular hole about two meters in diameter.

"If this was the queerats' doing, how did they manage to create the hole? I don't smell gunpowder or anything," Fujita said, sniffing the air.

"Who cares about that! Let's get in there," Kuramochi said, rising from the boat.

"Wait. We have no idea what's in there."

Kuramochi brushed Fujita aside and stepped out of the boat.

We watched him go in mute amazement. We weren't Kaburagi Shisei. The queerats would have no problem springing a surprise attack on us.

But the darkness around us remained undisturbed. Everything was silent. Kuramochi strode toward the entrance and peeked into the hole.

"…no one. Just splintered wood everywhere. Like some giant ball smashed the door in." His voice echoed out into the night.

"Saki, isn't this kind of strange?" Satoru whispered nervously into my ear.

"Why?"

"It's too quiet."

"I guess so…"

I paused. It was weird that there wasn't even the hum of insects. And not just that; at this time of year, the rice paddies should have been filled with croaking frogs.

"…could the queerats be hiding nearby?"

"Yeah. A lot of them, I think."

"What do we do?"

Satoru beckoned for Fujita and Okano to come closer, and explained the situation.

"…they're waiting for all of us to disembark. They probably want to strike when we're least prepared."

"S-so should we attack first then?"

"Yes. But if we do it now, they would target Kuramochi."

"We have to call him back," Okano whispered, her voice trembling.

"No, that would give away that we know what they're planning. And if they start shooting blindly at us, that would be dangerous too. Kuramochi may not be able to make it back safely.

"So what do we do?" I asked.

"Wait for Kuramochi to enter the hospital. Once he's safely inside, we'll crush the bastards.

Kuramochi hesitated outside the entrance. The inside of the building was even darker than the night outside, but it was still too dangerous to light a torch.

"Heeey. What are you guys doing? Are you coming?" he called back to us, sounding irritated.

"We'll be right there. Just hold on a minute. We're going to check out the surrounding area," Satoru answered.

"Tch. What, are you chickening out?" he scoffed, then stepped resolutely into the hospital and disappeared from view.

Now! We released our cantus into the fields around us.

The rice paddies burst into flames so intense they seemed to almost reach the sky.

For two or three seconds, nothing happened. Just as I was beginning to think that we had been overly paranoid about the whole thing, an entire army of soldiers leapt out of the mud. There were hundreds of them. They drew the weapons they had hidden among the stalks of rice and fired relentlessly at us.

But the moment the queerats revealed their positions, it was over. The flames exposed their positions to us, and they were temporarily blinded by the fire after hiding in the dark for so long. Only a few arrows and bullets struck the boat; most missed by a wide margin and flew over our heads.

The four of us began a merciless attack. Fueled by fear, anger, and a need for vengeance, the images we created wrung the queerats' necks, smashed their skulls in, snapped their spines, and crushed their hearts. We didn't even notice the rainbow sparks made by cantus interfering with each other. The only thought we had was that not a single queerat could be allowed to live; they needed to be thoroughly exterminated. The air was filled with the crackle of burning crops and shrieks of dying queerats. It had turned into hell.

"Enough! Stop! That's enough!" Satoru shouted ten minutes later.

The fields of rice were almost entirely burnt away, and the queerats had stopped attacking completely.

"Did we get them…?" Fujita stepped forward, unable to contain his excitement.

"Yes. They're probably all dead." he answered.

The water in the paddies extinguished the fires and darkness closed in on us again. The stink of charred flesh hung in the air.

"I…just…" Okano lurched forward and began puking off the side of the boat.

"Calm down, Okano. Just relax. It's okay. No one enjoys doing this. Even if the targets are queerats." I rubbed her back.

"Come on, it's okay. It's okay, it's okay…" Fujita repeated robotically.

He seemed to suddenly remember Kuramochi and turned to shout, "Heeey! Kuramochi! You okay?"

But there was no answer.

"What happened to him?" he asked Satoru, bewildered.

"I don't know. But as long as he wasn't struck by a stray bullet or something, he'll be fine."

"There aren't any more queerats, right? Should we go and check?"

"I guess so. There might still be enemies hiding inside though."

"Hm. I see…so what should we do?"

In the time that we had traveled to the hospital, Fujita had gradually pushed the position of leader on to Satoru. Even now, he was probably just acting like he valued the input of a younger teammate.

"I'll go."

"Really? That'd be great-"

"Satoru! Are you crazy?" I shouted.

"It's okay. We've already killed all the bastards that were waiting to ambush us, so now there's no chance of being attacked from behind."

"But still…"

"Cover me."

Satoru stepped quietly off the boat and walked toward the hospital entrance. He checked the area carefully then came back.

"Kuramochi's not there. He probably went farther inside."

"I see. Could you go take a quick look?" Fujita wheedled.

My temper flared. I wasn't going to watch him walk into a death trap.

"No! Let's call for help! It's too dangerous to go alone."

"But everyone's in trouble right now. They can't spare more people for this," Fujita said reproachfully.

"Stop giving these flippant suggestions when all you're doing is sitting safely on the sidelines! Since you have such great ideas, why don't you go instead?"

He fell silent, looking ashamed.

"Satoru, you can't! Don't go inside!"

Satoru looked conflicted, but came back to us.

"But we're not getting anywhere at this rate."

"And your death will get us somewhere?"

This finally seemed to get through to him, and he faltered.

"No, I didn't mean…"

Obviously he had never outgrown the bad habit of not thinking about the consequences when he got too involved in something.

"…okay. Fine. I see your point, Watanabe," Fujita said soothingly.

"Let's raze the entire building. There's no other solution. That way, if there are any queerats hiding inside…"

"How could you say that? You're supposed to be our leader."

Surprisingly, it was Okano who had interrupted.

"There could be survivors in there. Oouchi and Kuramochi too. Razing the building… Are they all just collateral damage to you?"

"No, that's not what I meant at all…I was thinking we could take the building apart bit by bit," he stuttered.

"Ah, over there!" I shouted, looking up.

There was a faint light in the third-floor windows.

"What's that?"

Satoru noticed it too. A flickering light. It hadn't been there earlier when we first arrived. And it probably wasn't visible when we had set the paddies on fire.

"Someone's there…" Satoru started toward the hospital again. "It's not a firefly. This is someone's cantus."

He could have told me that it was will-o'-the-wisp and I would've believed him.

"It's probably someone signaling for help. We've got to go."

"What if it's a trap? I mean, if they have the time to make a ball of light, why not just open the window and shout for help?"

Satoru shook his head. "They might not be able to. Maybe they're badly hurt and can't move. Anyway, I'm going. I don't know who it is, but I can't just leave them there."

He had made up his mind this time and there was no point stopping him.

"Fine. I'll go too."

"No, Saki…"

"If you go alone, who's going to cover your back?"

I stepped off the boat, a little unsteadily since I still wasn't used to my clogs.

"I'll come too," Okano said quietly but firmly. "It's safer with three people."

"Okay. Well, it might actually be dangerous if too many of us go…" Fujita said, making a show of sounding thoroughly disappointed.

No one responded to him.

"I'm going. I have to make sure Oouchi and Kuramochi are unhurt."

Okano stepped off the boat and followed behind us.

"Alright. I'll stay and keep a lookout. It's too risky if we all go. If anything happens, give me a shout."

It was totally obvious to everyone that he was just scared to come with us, but his reasoning wasn't entirely wrong. In the end, Fujita stayed in the boat alone and the three of us went to search the hospital.

One by one, Satoru, me, and Okano went through the destroyed entrance. As Kuramochi had said, the inside was littered with splintered wooden planks.

We gathered up thin sticks of wood and lit them to make torches. Making ourselves so visible was dangerous, but it was almost impossible to advance further without a source of light.

The first floor was a large lobby with a reception booth on the right side. Directly in front of us was a split staircase that led to the second floor. Normally, we probably would have searched all the rooms on this floor before moving on, but right now we needed to get to the third floor as soon as possible. If someone really was injured up there, we had to help them right away.

Satoru led the way up. Since most patients were moved around with cantus, the stairs were more for show than for function. I kept watch to the left and right, and Okano watched the rear. The creaking of the wooden stairs beneath my clogs kept making me jump.

"Where do you think Kuramochi went?" Okano asked, finally unable to bear the silence.

Neither Satoru nor I could think of anything comforting to say, so we stayed quiet.

As we ascended to the third floor, the tension became almost unbearable. I kept imagining that Kuramochi had vanished completely, but couldn't stand the thought of not finding anything at all.

Satoru stopped just before the third-floor landing.

"What?" I whispered as quietly as possible.

"The light from before. It's on the right side of the hall. You can see it reflected in the window," he answered. "Saki, Okano, float your torches forward slowly."

We did as he said. The two torches drifted slowly onto the landing. The hallway filled with light.

"Still can't see anything."

He began to concentrate. A faint shimmer appeared halfway down the hall. A mirror. Satoru adjusted the angle slowly.

The torches lit the right side of the hall. Nothing. No, there was a human shape lying on the ground. Completely still. It looked dead.

Satoru rotated the mirror to reflect the left side of the hall.

There. Four queerat soldiers frozen as if in shock. They could probably see us in the mirror as well. One hastily lifted a blowgun to its mouth. The dart flew through the mirror and down the hall.

"Kill them!" Satoru ordered.

I had no idea what to do. We had never used cantus on something that wasn't directly in our line of sight. But one of the queerats was lifted into the air. Satoru had gotten a hold of it.

We imitated his technique and tried to capture a queerat using just the mirror's reflection.

Satoru twisted the neck of his queerat. Okano blew the head off of the one who had used the blowgun.

I finally managed project my mental image on the reversed scene in the mirror. By now, I was completely numb to harming any living being that wasn't human. I slashed the queerat's throat with an invisible scythe and let the body fall to the ground in a spray of blood. In that time, Satoru killed the final soldier.

"Shouldn't we have kept one alive?"

"No. We couldn't have used it as a messenger anyway. Only a few high ranking ones can speak Japanese."

We finally stepped out onto the third floor and inched forward slowly, wary of more traps. But there didn't seem to be any more queerats.

Okano let out a cry as we approached the figure lying in the hall.

"Kuramochi…it can't be!"

"It would be better if you didn't look."

Satoru led Okano away from the corpse. I hugged her as she sobbed.

"It doesn't look like he suffered. He probably died instantly," he said.

I thought the same. We had lit the fields on fire the second Kuramochi entered the hospital. He had probably turned to see what was happening and was struck by an arrow from behind. The queerats then dragged his body to the third floor and used it as bait to try to kill us.

"Look over there," Satoru said, walking farther down the hall.

"Careful!"

"It's fine. There aren't any more soldiers lying in wait. Now we have to figure out where that light we saw was coming from…" he stopped speaking abruptly.

"What?"

"Saki, come here!"

He rushed into one of the rooms on the right side of the hall. We chased after him.

My eyes fell upon an utterly unbelievable sight.

4

Three large, cocoon-like objects hung from the ceiling. The strangeness of it shocked me at first, but I soon realized that they were sheets wrapped in bandages like an Egyptian mummy. From the black hair sticking out of them, I could tell they were human. The chest area of the cocoons rose and fell slightly. They were still alive.

"Get them down."

Working together, we held the cocoons up, cut the bandages tying them to the ceiling, and slowly lowered them to the floor.

We unwrapped the sheets to find three people. One, Dr. Noguchi, was a doctor I had been to. The other two were a nurse and a cleaning lady, Seki and Kashimura. All three were blindfolded and had their hands tied behind them. When we untied and removed their blindfolds, they sat staring into space and shivering like frightened animals.

"Are you okay?" Satoru asked.

They didn't respond.

"Maybe they're hurt. A concussion or something."

Okano looked them over carefully but found no injuries.

"Or maybe they were drugged…?"

Satoru tilted their heads up and looked into their eyes.

Something about this situation was making my hair stand on end. I wouldn't have been half as scared if we had come in and found three brutally murdered corpses. I couldn't help feeling that something was incredibly wrong.

But I just couldn't put my finger on it.

"Umm, so the light we saw was made by one of them?" Okano asked skeptically.

"I guess so. I can't think of any other explanation."

"If that were the case, shouldn't they have been able to free themselves?"

"No…they were too well restrained. Being blindfolded meant they couldn't see what they were doing and it's extremely difficult to use cantus in that kind of situation. And I imagine they must have been afraid of falling from the ceiling as well. Plus, they were still under surveillance by the queerats."

"Then what about that light?"

"They must have tried as hard as they could to recreate the hospital layout from memory and layered the image of a firefly over it. Their only hope was that someone would see the light and come help them."

As Satoru and Okano talked, I finally figured what was wrong with this whole situation.

"Satoru…why do you think these people were being held captive?"

"Huh? Because they were ambushed? It's not that surprising. Yakomaru's plan has already killed dozens of people."

"But these people are alive. They could have been killed easily if they were attacked from behind. But they were captured alive without a struggle, and the queerats even went as far as to blindfold them. …this can't be normal."

Satoru said nothing.

"…this should never have happened," Okano said, sounding unnerved. "Anyone with cantus would have been able to fight against being taken hostage, or against any other type of situation. And there were three of them…"

"But we can't be sure they were able to fight. They could have been knocked unconscious, or tranquilized, or something. There's just no way to know what really happened…"

Satoru folded his arms in contemplation.

"…ah. Aah. Aah."

Dr. Noguchi seemed to finally be coming around.

"Are you okay? We're here to rescue you. Everything's okay now. We've killed all the queerats," Satoru said, kneeling in front of him.

"R…run. Hurry," Dr. Noguchi said hoarsely.

"Why? What happened?"

"Th-they'll be back soon… Run, now."

"Who's going to be back?"

"Oouchi–he's a patient here–is he okay?"

As Satoru and Okano peppered Dr. Noguchi with questions, the nurse Seki started screaming.

I don't think she was actually trying to say anything. It was just pure, unadulterated fear. In a night that had been full of nothing but terror, her scream was the only thing that chilled me to the core. I had never in my life heard a human being make such a noise.

"Seki, please calm down. Everything's alright!"

Okano, despite her own rising fear, tried desperately to calm Seki down. Not only did it have no effect, Seki seemed to become even more frantic. Her shrieks echoed throughout the half-demolished hospital.

Then, triggered by the noise, Kashimura got up abruptly.

We didn't even have time to open our mouths. She took one glance at us, turned on her heel, and ran. She was surprisingly steady on her feet and we heard her running down the stairs two at a time.

What were we supposed to do? I looked questioningly at Satoru.

"Let's get out of here first. We'll take them with us on the boat."

"What about the people who ran?"

"We can worry about that later."

We grasped Dr. Noguchi and Seki under the arms and pulled them to their feet.

"Hurry, hurry, run…"

Just when I thought he had finally come back to reality, he started muttering incoherently again as he stumbled unsteadily forward. Seki had finally stopped screaming, but now she trembled so violently she didn't seem to be capable of making any sounds at all.

As we descended the stairs, we heard someone outside shouting.

"What is that?"

Satoru went back up to the third floor and looked out the window. I came up beside him.

We saw a figure running full speed away from the hospital. It was difficult to see by the light of the stars, but it was probably Kashimura.

"Hey! What happened? You don't have to run anymore!" Fujita shouted, standing at the prow of the boat.

Kashimura completely ignored him.

Satoru opened the window halfway and shouted, "Fujita, that's…"

"…no!" Dr. Noguchi warned, mustering as much strength as he could to talk. "They'll hear you if you shout.

His voice was quiet, but was filled with so much desperation that we jerked away from the windows reflexively.

"What are you talking about? The queerats…"

"Not the queerats! He…he'll come back!"

Seki started wailing again, a grating, piercing shriek like the call of some demonic bird.

"Shut her up. Quick!" Dr. Noguchi said.

Okano clapped a hand over her mouth. Dr. Noguchi had an authoritative tone that you couldn't help but obey. Seki struggled wildly, but quickly grew tired and went quiet.

"Who's 'he'? What the hell happened here?" Satoru asked, grabbing Dr. Noguchi by the shoulders.

"He…I don't know who he is. But he killed them. The staff, the patients, all of them."

Okano went stiff with shock.

"Only the three of us survived. He probably wanted to use us as hostages…"

"Why didn't you fight back?"

"Fight? That's impossible. He killed everyone who tried to run."

There was a quiet clicking sound. I looked around for the source and realized it was coming from Dr. Noguchi. Revisiting that terrible memory was making his teeth chatter uncontrollably.

"Run. Hurry. If you don't…"

There was a crazed look in his eyes.

"Satoru, we have to get out of here!" I shouted, the feeling of impending danger bearing down on me more heavily by the second.

"Alright."

Without another word, all of us fled down the stairs and into the lobby. Right at that moment, we heard a terrified scream.

"Help!"

Kashimura was running back toward the ruined entrance. She was about seventy or eighty meters away.

"Hey! This way!" Fujita shouted.

"Too late…we can't leave from the front. Run for the back exit."

Dr. Noguchi spun around and stumbled back into the hospital.

The rest of us stood there, unsure of what to do.

The next second, Kashimura's entire body was enveloped in flames.

"That…that's impossible," Satoru whispered.

I couldn't believe my eyes. I felt as if I were in a living nightmare. It just couldn't be real. To be able to do something like that…

Kashimura flailed her arms frantically, her body writhing in pain. A gust of wind tore through the flames, making them flicker wildly.

It was Fujita. He was trying to put out the fire with cantus.

"We have to help!"

I got ready to put out the rest.

"Stop!"

Satoru grabbed my arms.

"We have to help, now!"

"Run!"

He hauled me forcefully back into the hospital. As we went, I looked out once more.

The fire was burning more fiercely than before. Kashimura lay motionless on the ground as the flames consumed her.

I saw Fujita. He had left the boat and was heading toward Kashimura, but suddenly turned and started running in our direction.

Then his body was jerked back.

I gasped. So it was…but it couldn't be…

Fujita hung in the air. He wasn't levitating himself.

Someone was holding him up with cantus.

I fought back a rising scream.

When confronted with something utterly unbelievable, people lose all sense of rational thought and turn into gaping idiots. At that moment, I was the gaping idiot.

In front of me, not fifty meters away, a living human was being torn apart limb by limb.

"Don't look."

Satoru forced my head around to face the other direction.

"Gyaaaaaaaah…!"

A horrible scream came from behind us. The air was filled with the wet stink of blood.

Satoru had me by the arm and was running silently deeper into the hospital.

"Quick, this way," Dr. Noguchi called, waving us over.

I hadn't seen it earlier, but there was a narrow hallway behind the stairs. Later, I learned that it was a passage for transporting corpses.

"What in the world was that?" Satoru asked shakily.

"You know, don't you? Anyone would. It's a…"

He suddenly went silent and gestured for us to do the same.

I strained my ears, trying to hear.

Footsteps. Small, light steps slowly approaching the hospital entrance.

It entered the hospital. Then came the creaking of wood as it went up the stairs.

I caught sight of Seki's face and was terrified by what I saw. Her face was contorted with fear and she looked as if she was about to start screaming again. If she did, we were done for.

Before she could open her mouth, Okano sprang into action. She pulled Seki toward her, covering Seki's face with her body and began patting her rhythmically on the back like she was comforting a child. Seki struggled for a moment, but quickly relaxed.

The footsteps continued up toward the second floor.

Dr. Noguchi waved for us to keep going. We crept forward until we reached the back door. He grasped the doorknob and twisted.

The door didn't open. I thought our hearts would stop right then and there, but then he slid the bolt above the door and it swung open quietly.

I felt as if I had escaped from a tiny, rotting coffin into the infinite vastness of hell.

When we had shut the door behind us, Dr. Noguchi turned and tottered off in a random direction.

"That's the wrong way," Satoru said, reaching out to stop Dr. Noguchi.

He pushed Satoru's hand away brusquely.

"Don't follow me. Pick a direction and go."

"Wait."

"Listen. We have to split up. And even then we might all get killed anyway. But if we're lucky, one person will survive."

A strange sound echoed through the building. A cross between a crying scream and an animalistic roar. He had probably seen the queerat corpses and discovered that his hostages were missing. We had to get out of here.

"We stand no chance alone. We have to fight as one."

"As one…? What are you talking about?" Dr. Noguchi's lips twisted in what looked like a sneer.

Behind us, the footsteps were coming down the stairs. We were out of time.

"You saw him kill those two people just now. It doesn't matter if there are five of us or a hundred of us. The outcome is the same."

"But…"

"What are you going to do against a fiend? Just go already!" He shoved Satoru aside.

Fiend… My blood froze just hearing the word.

Logic and common sense rebelled against this piece of information. How could a fiend be part of the queerats' attack?

But the evidence was right in front of me. The burnt and dismembered corpses of two people killed by cantus. Only a fiend could have done it.

"There's no other choice. We have to go out the other way," Satoru said, looking at Dr. Noguchi's retreating figure.

"Wait." I grabbed his sleeve.

"What?"

"It's coming…! It's circling around the building."

A faint sound was carried to us on the wind. I listened hard. No doubt about it. The sound wasn't as clear as when he had entered the hospital, but I could hear footsteps crunching on sand and rustling grass.

Wordlessly, Satoru motioned for us to come together. Then he carefully opened the door that we had come through minutes earlier.

He had taken off his clogs at some point and now held them in his hands. Okano and I did the same. With Seki sandwiched between us, we quietly entered the hospital again. Satoru slipped in after us and shut the door carefully.

Just in time. Before we could even catch our breath, we heard footsteps outside the door. It was only two or three meters away.

At the same time, I heard a strange moaning sound. A deep, throaty sound like someone chanting a spell. Then a high, hissing sound, the kind a snake makes when it's threatened.

The fiend… Outside, just a thin plank of wood away, was the fiend.

I prayed for my life.

God, please. Don't let him find us.

Lead the fiend away.

Just let everything be…I stopped.

There was no sound. No footsteps. No creepy moaning.

I didn't hear him leave, so it was probably still standing right outside. It was being quiet for a reason.

The fiend was listening. I didn't even dare to swallow. In the silence that stretched on endlessly, I saw the thing I feared most. The doorknob turning slowly…

I couldn't stand it anymore. I felt myself losing consciousness.

But the door never opened.

"Grrrrr…★✻∀§▲ЖАД!" the fiend let out a strange, high-pitched sound.

The next instant he gave a victorious shout. Before I could even react, I heard a bone-chilling scream.

I clamped my hands over my ears. It was Dr. Noguchi's voice.

"Shit! Get away! Fucking fiend!"

The unbearable scream came again. The fiend was toying with him.

"Hurry, this way!"

Satoru sprinted back through the hospital toward the front entrance. He stopped beside the hole in the wall and peeked outside. The three of us followed close behind him. My bare feet were bleeding from being pierced by dozens of splinters, but I strangely didn't feel anything.

"Who…who the hell are you?" Dr. Noguchi's dying shrieks echoed through the hospital.

I gritted my teeth and turned away. There was nothing I could do. Don't ask. Don't think. Right now, if I didn't focus on getting out of here alive…

"The boat looks intact. Hurry!"

Satoru stepped outside and waved for us to follow. We ran as fast as we could, but came to a halt mere inches outside the hospital. Seki had planted her feet and was fighting tooth and nail against going any farther.

"What are you doing? We have to get out of here…hey, snap out of it!" I shouted desperately.

"Saki, hurry. Leave her there," Satoru said calmly.

"But…!"

"At this rate, we're all going to die. If we don't go back and warn the others, the entire district is doomed.

"The two of you should go," Okano said quietly. "I'll hide here with her. Please come back for us later."

Her voice was calm, as if she had already accepted death.

"No way. I could never!"

"There's no other choice. Plus, fleeing by boat could be more dangerous. After all, he wouldn't expect anyone to stay here. …now hurry!"

"Saki! Let's go."

Satoru grabbed my arm again and started dragging me away.

"I'm sorry…" I said to Okano, tears flowing down my face.

I turned my back on her and ran as hard as I could toward the boat.

We passed a charred, blackened corpse. It was still smoking. Then Fujita came into view, his limbs twisted in all the wrong directions. I tried to shove my emotions aside, but that didn't stop me from shaking uncontrollably.

Satoru cast off the moment we got into the boat. He slowly turned the boat around and pushed off. We lay down below the gunwale to keep out of sight.

Against the dark sky, all I could see were ghostly images of the hospital. I kept thinking that the fiend would appear at any moment. My entire body was limp with fear.

Satoru deftly maneuvered the boat through the narrow waterway away from the hospital. How was he controlling the boat when he couldn't see where he was going? I looked over at him and saw that he was using the starlight reflecting off of a small mirror to guide him.

Eventually, the boat rounded a large bend.

"…We're safe now. He can't see us from the hospital anymore," Satoru whispered.

"Then hurry, go as fast as you can!" I said.

Satoru shook his head. "We should stay quiet for a little longer. Even if the fiend isn't here, there still might be queerats around. We're too close to the banks; we won't be able to escape if they fire at us. There's a wider canal ahead. We'll go full speed from there."

We peeked timidly over the side of the boat. There was only the quiet whisper of the boat moving through the water.

"I wonder if Okano is okay…"

Satoru didn't answer. He probably knew there was nothing he could say to give me any real peace of mind.

"Was that really a fiend?"

Satoru cocked his head, thinking.

"I don't know what else it could be."

"But…where did it come from? There aren't any abnormal people in the district. The Board of Education has been watching everyone with eagle eyes."

"I don't know. I don't know anything right now. There's only one thing that's clear."

"What?"

"The reason Kiroumaru's army was annihilated. No matter how skilled his warriors were, they were no match for a fiend."

"That makes sense…"

"And one more thing. Why did Yakomaru start the war? I don't know for sure what connection the fiend has with the queerats, but if it's what I think it is…"

He went quiet.

"What's wrong?"

"Quiet… Don't make any sudden movements. Just keep talking normally."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't change the pitch of your voice."

"Alright. Like this? Tell me. What's going on?" I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

"There's a boat following us about a hundred meters behind us."

"Huh? …no way."

I felt the blood drain from my body.

"It's the boat we used as a decoy. The fiend's on it, I'm positive."

I looked around slowly and saw, by the starlight reflecting off the water, the silhouette of the other boat.

"What do we do…? Why isn't he attacking? And…"

"Don't raise your voice. The second it realizes we've noticed it, we're done for. …as for why it hasn't attacked, it's probably letting us lead it to where all the townspeople are."

This was the worst situation possible. If we kept going, we'd invite the murderer right into our midst. But I couldn't think of a way to get it off our tail either. I racked my brain desperately, but fear had numbed my mind and I couldn't come up with anything.

"If we go as fast as we can…can we escape into the canal?"

"No, we won't make it," Satoru said shortly. "The canal is a straight line, there's nowhere to hide. Even if we went as fast as we could, it would capture us with cantus in a second."

We couldn't stop its boat, or hinder it in any way either. The fiend would attack the second he saw any sort of opposition from us. As long as we were in his line of sight, he held all the power.

"Then…wait. Are you saying we have no chance?"

"Hold on. I'm thinking. Just keep talking."

All I could rely on now was Satoru's steady calmness. I kept talking about whatever came to mind.

"I never thought we'd be in a situation like this. I still can't believe everything that's happened tonight. It's the Summer Festival too. A lot of people died. Some right in front of my eyes. No one saved them. …and not just that. We abandoned Okano and the others…no, we left them to die. Why did it come to that? What in the world went wrong?"

Tears spilled down my cheeks.

"I don't want to die here. I don't want to die not knowing anything. It'd be like a bug that got stepped on out of the blue. At the very least, I want to know why I have to die. I can't just die and leave things the way they are."

Satoru was still thinking with single-minded concentration.

"I don't believe that Maria is dead. I don't want to believe it. I love her. …but she saved us tonight. Remember? When we were about to go to the square, I saw a younger version of her. And in chasing after her, we avoided the queerats' surprise attack. If we had gone to the square, we might have been shot and killed. …like Hiromi Torigai. I hated her. After all, she wanted to kill us like we were just disposable lab rats. Wanted to kill us with those terrible impure cats. But now I understand. She was just afraid. She felt she had a duty to prevent the horrible events that happened tonight. …but that doesn't mean I'm about to forgive her for what she did to Maria. And not just that. Even the things she did to our friend, the faceless boy."

My chest hurt so much I could barely get the words out.

"I loved him. Loved him from the bottom of my heart. It kills me that I can't remember his name. …I love you too, Satoru. But I still can't deal with my feelings about him. And as long as I can't figure that out, I can't move forward. So…"

Satoru looked at me. "I feel the same way, Saki. It's embarrassing to admit this as an adult, but I can't get over my feelings for him because my memories were taken from me."

"Satoru…"

"That's why we can't die here. …we might not be able to defeat the fiend, but I think we can trick him and get away."

"How?"

This was the ray of hope I had so desperately hoped for. Satoru explained his plan.

"…the problem is how to get ashore. It'll be hard once we enter the wider canal. We have to find a spot before that. A place where the waterway narrows."

I perked up. "…no, the wider canal works better! The fiend wouldn't be suspicious if we went ashore there."

Satoru smiled as he listened to my reasoning.

"Alright. Let's do that. I've never levitated a person before, but I think I can manage it. We'll do it right when we enter the canal."

"Got it."

I went over the plan in my head. Although much of it depended on Satoru executing two techniques at the same time, it was up to me to make sure everything went well. If I failed, it would all be for nothing. We only had one chance.

The boat continued at the same slow pace, wearing down my patience bit by bit. If we sped up, it would attract suspicion, so all I could do was wait.

Finally, the way ahead of us was open. The narrow waterway would soon join the canal.

I realized that my vision was becoming clearer. Not because my eyes were adjusting to the dark, but because dawn was approaching.

Our trick would work much better in the dark, but apparently we didn't have that luxury anymore.

Satoru kept checking over his shoulder, measuring the distance between our boats. The fiend was about a hundred meters back, still following intently.

Our boat entered the intersection of the waterway and the canal and went left. The canal was dozens of meters wide, almost the same as the Tone River. The fiend was still in the waterway and had an unobstructed view of our boat.

Timing the moment carefully, Satoru waited for the moment the fiend's boat entered the canal and conjured a mirror behind our boat. It was probably larger than any mirror that had ever been created, spanning the entire width of the canal.

Just like that, we had doubled the distance between us to two hundred meters. The fiend was still traveling toward us, but it was now following its own reflection instead of our boat.

"Ready? I'm sending you over."

"Okay…!"

My body lifted off the boat and flew over the side. I skimmed over the water with the speed of a falcon.

We couldn't float freely through the air like Maria, but we could manage to move each other a fair distance.

In a few moments, I was far away from the boat. A pillow of air slowed me down and I fell onto the bank of the canal.

As soon as I dropped down on the grass, I flipped over and lay low to the ground, scanning for the positions of the boats. Satoru's boat was already well ahead. Next came the mirror, then the fiend's boat. The fiend was still concentrating on chasing its own reflection and didn't seem to have noticed me flying through the air.

Now it was my turn. I lifted Satoru out of the boat, and being careful to stay in the shadow of the mirror, brought him ashore.

Satoru had his arms around his knees as he sped toward the bank. I realized he was going too fast, but it was too late to slow him down. He bounced when he hit the ground and went rolling across the grass.

The mirror shattered in a puff of mist and disappeared. It was still dark enough that the fiend probably didn't notice the sudden change in the boat's appearance.

There was still more to the plan. I pushed the now empty boat as fast as I could. The bottom of the boat lifted out of the water and began skimming the surface of the canal. It was a lot easier controlling the boat once I wasn't in it. The fiend didn't speed up and gradually fell behind.

Then, Satoru's speculation came true. The boat we had been riding in suddenly burst into flames.

I drew back my cantus to prevent it from coming in contact with the fiend's. The burning boat continued traveling forward by momentum until it bumped against the bank of the canal. The flames ate away at it until it slowly sank beneath the water.

With the fire extinguished, the surrounding area was once again enveloped by darkness.

Satoru approached, still crouched low. He crawled the last few meters and came up beside me. He seemed to have landed hard on his side and kept rubbing at it. We grasped each other's hands tightly.

The fiend approached the place where the boat had sunk and circled it almost longingly. What was he doing? We watched impatiently. As long as the fiend kept hanging around, we couldn't move. If he spotted us now, there would be no escape.

Finally, it slowly turned the boat around. We held our breath as it passed in front of us. Every hair on my neck was raised in anticipation, but nothing happened. The fiend returned the way he had come. My body went weak with relief.

But there was no time to celebrate. As the fiend headed back in the direction of the hospital, my spirits fell again.

I hoped Okano had managed to escape. If they were still hiding in there…

"Alright, let's go," Satoru said, pulling me to my feet. "Since our boat's gone, we'll have to continue on foot. We have to hurry."

"Do we have to throw each other over the hill this time?" I said as casually as possible to hide the fact that I was near tears.

"Give me a break. I've suffered enough thanks to you." He smiled wryly.

It was now light enough that I could see him clearly.

Faint rays of light were coming from the east. The hills near the horizon were dyed a deep crimson.

It was an unsettling sight, a blood-red dawn.

We had to get back to town as soon as possible to let everyone know what we had seen. That thought drove us relentlessly onward, but we were forced to move slowly in case there were queerats lying in wait.

Moreover, we were both barefoot. The bleeding gashes in my feet had gotten worse, and even after Satoru fashioned a makeshift boot for me with strips of cloth from his yukata, it still hurt so much that we weren't making much progress.

Various thoughts flitted through my mind. Terrible thoughts that I tried desperately to drive away. I tried to concentrate on the situation at hand. That meant thinking about the pain in my feet, and not about all the scary things that had happened since last night.

But eventually, my mind started trying to escape the present reality altogether.

I thought about the ancient civilizations.

Despite the fact that cantus didn't exist back then, there appeared to be numerous accounts of miracles being performed. Of course, there were an infinite number of things we were capable of now that were impossible back then, but our current society had fallen far behind the ancients in two important areas.

The first was our lack of communication methods. The old civilization used radio waves and machines to send large amounts of data almost instantaneously. Now, we used speaking tubes to communicate over short distances, but naturally it wasn't enough to cover the entire district. Shisei Kaburagi's ability to write in the sky aside, the carrier pigeons and smoke signals we used to communicate over long distances were so low-tech the ancients would have laughed their heads off. Normally, these methods worked just fine, but in emergencies, communication is more important than anything else. I don't think anyone truly realized this until today.

The second was our limited ability to travel. Kamisu 66 was full of waterways that acted like blood vessels in a body, carrying people and goods wherever they needed to go, but when the canals were frozen over in the winter, there were only a few roads we could travel by. Though in this case, we didn't think it was a problem.

Soon, Yakomaru would exploit this very weakness with his brilliant planning and show everyone that our district was more vulnerable than we had ever imagined. But of course, we didn't know that yet.

Let's get back on track. As we marched toward town on our bloody, injured feet, we came across an empty house in the fields and decided to take a short break inside.

I felt that Maria had led us to find this house. Earlier, when we were lost and trying to decide which way to go, I was sure I heard someone, a guardian angel, whisper in my ear and give me a push in this direction. Satoru said I was overthinking it. In any case, I thought that coming across this place was something close to a miracle, since there were no other houses within a five-kilometer radius.

Usually, we would never have considered breaking into someone's house while they were gone, but in an emergency like this, finding shelter was our first priority.

We took off our torn yukata and put on clean clothes we found in the house. Unfortunately, all the clothes were made for men, either in an adult or a child size. I put on cotton shorts and a khaki T-shirt. Satoru chose jeans and a Hawaiian shirt. Amazingly, we both found shoes that fit well.

In the kitchen, we found dough that was left to rise. We put it in a pot along with miso and whatever vegetables were at hand and made flour dumpling soup.

There was a cart sitting behind the house. It had two large wooden wheels and was basically just a big handcart, but to us, it looked like just the vehicle we needed to travel quickly.

I felt bad for stealing, but we took the cart anyway, intending to come back and thank the owner later. The axle and wheels were sturdily made, so we were able go at a good speed, but the road was bumpy and there being only two wheels meant the cart tilted back and forth constantly. I started feeling sick.

"I…I can't take this."

I got off, trying my hardest not to throw up. The dumplings I had just eaten were sloshing around in my stomach.

"Yeah, this thing really isn't meant to carry people."

Satoru looked a bit green too. It probably didn't help that we had gone an entire night without sleep.

"Let's take the canals. I don't know how long it's going to take us to get there at this rate."

"But we don't have a boat."

"Let's make one out of the cart. It might not be buoyant enough, but we can make up for that with cantus."

I looked at the cart. If we could get it to float, it could work as a kind of raft.

"But what if we get ambushed by queerats while we're on the water?"

We were completely visible in the canals, so there was no telling where or when an attack would come.

"We'll have to take that risk. It's probably too late to worry about that anyway. …well, there's two of us, so as long as the fiend doesn't appear, we'll manage somehow."

I wasn't sure if Satoru's optimism was founded on logical reasoning, or if he was just too tired to think things through.

As we made our way through the tall grass toward the canal, sounds of explosions came from far away.

"What now?" Satoru asked, looking grim.

"The fight's still going…"

There came a second explosion, and a third. They were getting louder.

"Without knowing what's going on, all we have are useless guesses. We just have to hurry back as soon as possible."

After that, I think I heard another seven or eight blasts.

Each explosion was like a whip spurring us onward. I still had no idea what was happening, except that if the humans were attacking, they wouldn't be using explosives.

Finally, we came across the main canal that led to the center of town and Satoru lowered the handcart into the water. It floated, but water sloshed over the side when we tried to sit in it. We removed the metal rims on the wheels to make it lighter, but even then, a moderately big wave could have sunk us in an instant.

We couldn't afford to waste any more time, so we set off down the canal. Satoru propelled us forward while I focused on keeping the cart afloat. I had hoped that spinning the wheels would help us float better, but unfortunately it had absolutely no effect. All it did was make the cart tilt back so much we almost fell off. We grabbed on to the front edge of the cart to steady ourselves and discovered that this was a fairly stable position. Keeping the front slightly above the water and pushing from behind, like riding a surfboard, gave us twice the speed we had before. We sped ahead, leaving a wake trailing behind us.

The next few kilometers passed quickly. We were both soaked through, but since it was summer, it didn't feel too terrible. However, clinging onto the raft for dear life in addition to constantly using cantus was exhausting. On top of that, I couldn't see what was in front of the cart, so I kept tensing up in preparation for possibly hitting something.

Still, compared to walking the entire way on my injured feet while keeping watch for a surprise attack, this was positively enjoyable.

We were nearing a smaller canal that branched off of this one. The wheels hit something underwater and a dull shock ran through the cart.

"What was that?"

Satoru stopped the cart and lowered the front so it was now lying flat on the water. The waves came dangerously close to spilling over the edge.

"…the right wheel, I think. It's stuck on something."

"A rock?"

"There shouldn't be a rock this big in the middle of the canal. It's at least four or five meters deep here."

We peered over the edge of the cart.

At first, the thing was so large that I had no idea what I was looking at. But the water was clear enough that I was able to make out that something was lying at the bottom of the canal.

"What the heck is that…thing?"

Satoru was at a loss for words. The thing blended in with the sandy bottom of the canal, but I could tell that it was twenty or thirty meters long and tapered at both ends like a spindle. In other words, it looked like a gigantic sea cucumber.

"Was that what we hit?"

"I don't think we could have reached it in that position…"

He lowered his head to the water's surface and stared hard at the thing. I did the same. A rock a little ways away drifted slowly toward the thing. Satoru was moving it. I didn't even get a chance to tell him to be careful. The rock bobbed close to the thing's tail (I didn't actually know which end was which, but for convenience' sake, I'm calling the end that's pointing in the direction we were going the head) and thumped against it.

The reaction was instantaneous. The sea cucumber thing wriggled its giant body and swam off with unbelievable speed.

Right away, I grabbed it by the tail with cantus. As if it could feel my touch, the thing twisted its head back toward us and spewed a pitch-black cloud of liquid. It was a surprisingly large amount of liquid and the water all around was dyed black. I couldn't see a thing.

"Shit. Get to shore!"

We pulled away from the water and pushed the cart onto the left bank. Looking at the dark water, I couldn't guess where an attack would come from. We jumped off the cart and hid in the grass, trying to find a higher vantage point that overlooked the river.

Looking out at the water again, I saw that about a hundred meters of the canal had turned black.

"It's not poison, is it?" I asked.

Satoru looked at his hand that had been dyed by the water.

"No…but it's not ink like an octopus's or squid's either."

I peered closely at the inside of my forearm.

"The black stuff isn't liquid…"

I could see clear water and tiny black particles suspended in it.

"It's some kind of fine black powder."

Satoru looked at the water and chanted his mantra.

The water began to clear. He was making the particles sink to the bottom.

When the canal was about three-quarters clear, I spotted the monster. It seemed to notice that its smokescreen was disappearing and started swimming away again.

But this time, we were ready. I clamped down on its slug-like body and pulled it up out of the canal. Water streamed from its body, sending up giant sprays of mist.

The monster seemed to have a pretty good idea of what was happening and twisted around violently, trying to see where its captors were.

I gasped when I saw its face. As large as its body was, its head was no bigger than a human's. It had big, black eyes like a seal's. Even stranger was its mouth—two or three meters long and pointed like a crocodile or a bird's. If it weren't for its size, I would have said it had a mosquito's mouth.

"It's one of the mutant queerats," Satoru said.

I would not have believed it if I hadn't seen the Ground Spider's leaf fighters, or blowdogs before. There were some mutants that were able to move underwater and on land, like the frog soldiers, but this monster seemed to live exclusively in the water.

"…I see. This thing was trying to fog up the whole canal."

In order to gain control of the river leading to the center of town, Yakomaru had it dyed black. Once again his ingenuity scared me.

"But is this really that creature's only purpose?" Satoru asked, staring at his hand again. "If it was, they could have just used squid or octopus ink. Why the black powder…"

He gasped. "No. It has another purpose…I got it! The explosion from before!"

"What are you talking about?"

At that moment, the monster's eyes fell upon us. It looked at us unblinkingly. A long spike I hadn't noticed earlier stood up on its head, swaying in the wind. It looked like a flag or a fin.

"Watch out!" Satoru shouted.

The creature's mouth pointed this way and blew out an enormous cloud of black powder.

5

The black cloud completely obscured my vision. This was the crossroad between life and death.

If we breathed in the powder, it would choke us to death. If we built a wall around us, we'd still be stuck inside the cloud, unable to move. And we wouldn't have time react to what came next.

I released my hold on the creature and its fifty-ton body hit the ground like a sack of jelly. It lay flattened, undoubtedly dead from massive internal damage. Except it raised its head again and let out another blast of powder. In seconds, it emptied all the black powder stored in its body.

This is what I imagine happened next. The friction caused by expelling so much powder through its tubular beak heated it up hundreds of degrees. Then, either the monster created a spark itself, or a tiny piece of its beak broke off from the heat and flew into the cloud, effectively turning it into a flamethrower.

Whatever the cause, the entire cloud burst into flames. A so-called dust explosion. Whereas chunks of coal will burn slowly, powder or dust combines easily with oxygen in the air and burns explosively.

The blast was over two hundred meters in diameter. No one could have escaped from it, except maybe Shisei Kaburagi.

The second the black cloud surrounded me, my first thought was not to protect myself, but to save Satoru. Satoru seemed to have the same thought about me. I guess we were lucky we had a chance to practice throwing each other when we were escaping from the fiend.

As Satoru was obscured by the cloud, I called up the image of a catapult, hooked his body into it and flung him up into the sky as hard as I could.

At the same time, I felt a burst of speed so intense I almost passed out. When my vision cleared, the ground was already far, far below me.

Satoru had thrown me into the air at the same time I catapulted him, and I had instinctively protected my ears with cantus to prevent my eardrums from bursting from the rapid change in air pressure. Breathing through my nose, I equalized the pressure in my ears. As I free fell through the air, my stomach floated weightlessly inside me and made me nauseous. The wind tore at my shirt.

How far up was I? I could see all of Kamisu 66, the surrounding forests and even Mt. Tsukuba all in one glance. But Satoru was nowhere to be seen.

A large area below was shrouded in a mass of black dust, like some nasty mushroom slowly growing larger and larger.

I was about to fall right back into it. I flailed my arms around and tried desperately to make myself float, but had no idea what kind of image I was supposed to conjure up.

The black cloud below started exploding in dazzling flashes of light.

I was lifted up once again by the wind coming off of the blasts. In a few moments, I would be carried far away.

Flying felt neither wonderful nor frightening. Even though I had never been this far off the ground in my life, I knew I could soften my landing to an extent.

The sun shone blindingly down on me and white, cottony clouds drifted lazily across the sky.

That's when the hallucination started.

The bright sky suddenly turned dark as if light and darkness had been inverted.

The moon illuminated the earth below, and I could see each individual crater on its surface.

Ah, this…

I knew I was seeing something I had physically experienced before.

A memory that had been erased. It felt like it had been reassembled from bits and pieces of other memories.

The moon illuminated ■'s bungalow below.

Everything I could see was full of pits and craters.

The area around the bungalow was half-buried in dirt, like there had been a landslide. There was a deep rumbling coming from the ground along with the creaks and snaps of trees being pulled up by the roots.

This frightening apocalyptic scene grew smaller and smaller. I realized that I was flying backwards in a big arc. The wind buffeted my sweater this way and that. It blew away my barrette and my hair trailed out in front of me in the night air.

If I just crashed into something and died, that wouldn't be too bad.

With that thought, I closed my eyes.

And opened them again.

■ had saved me with the last of his strength.

I had to live.

I turned to face forward and opened my eyes against the stinging wind. My tears were whipped away behind me.

The vision had lasted just a second. The sky had returned to normal and sun was shining just as brightly as before.

I remembered clearly now. The faceless boy had saved my life once. Just like Satoru had just saved me.

Riding the wind from the explosions, I flew far away from the blast site, falling toward earth at breakneck speed all the while. It seemed like I was headed toward the center of the district.

I finally got a good look of the scenery below.

It was the main street of Hayring, usually the most crowded place in town. What I saw now shocked me. Almost everything had been destroyed, leaving behind mountains of debris and ruined buildings. There wasn't a single person to be seen.

I was descending too quickly. Gravity was pulling me down faster and faster. I pushed on the ground with cantus and slowed a little.

My next thought was to try a water landing. If I land in a canal, I should be able to avoid major injuries even if I couldn't slow down completely.

Then I saw that the canals were dry.

The water had been drained…

There was no time to wonder why. I immediately switched gears and called up the image of a pair of wings. I had to keep going, to glide just a bit farther.

A soft place to land, that was all I needed. Something yellow caught my eye. A field of sunflowers. We planted dense fields of them for their oil.

I struggled to change my trajectory toward the sunflower field. How in the world did Maria make flying look so easy?

The yellow flowers whizzed past below me. Crap. I couldn't slow down with the image I was using. I switched to the image of a pair of arms and slammed them down into the field. Flowers went flying everywhere.

The moment before impact, I closed my eyes instinctively. Broken stalks grazed my cheeks.

I hit the ground. Despite having the flowers as a cushion, I still had all the air knocked out of me and passed out on the bed of blossoms.

When I came to, I was lying facedown. Slowly, I moved my arms and legs, checking to see if they were still working. My palms were scraped raw but it looked like that was the worst of it.

I listened carefully to the noises around me and quietly stood up.

It was a beautiful summer morning. Birds were singing. Other than that, all was silent.

Where was Satoru? I tried to remember where I catapulted him, but my memory was hazy. I believed that he was okay, but couldn't help worrying anyway.

My head was spinning from overusing cantus. I probably only passed out for five or ten minutes, not nearly enough time to recover my strength.

If the queerats or that creature showed up now, I would have a hard time protecting myself. Fighting the fiend was completely out of the question. But I didn't have time to sit around pitying myself. I had to get to town.

I started walking, still keeping an eye on my surroundings.

Leaving the sunflower field, I entered a thicket of trees. After a while, I saw an area where the trees had been torn up. The explosions we had heard on the way here came to mind. No doubt some other monster similar to the creature in the canal had been blowing up the town and the shockwaves had reached all the way here.

But if the blasts were this powerful, the creature must have died along with them. A suicide bomber, in other words. Whereas the blowdog had protected the Ground Spider nest at the cost of its life, this powder-spewing creature had been bred as a decisive assault weapon against human enemies.

All the queerats were no more than pawns in a greater game. They didn't mind sacrificing themselves, or rather, they launched their attacks fully intending to die in the process.

This was something I had never imagined. We believed in the omnipotence of our power and underestimated what the queerats were capable of.

But what was driving the queerats to go to such lengths?

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I had stopped paying attention to my surroundings. I was almost out of the thicket when it happened.

A large boulder came flying right at me.

I was so taken by surprise that I couldn't even block with cantus. I fell back onto my butt. Luckily, its aim was off and the boulder flew over my head.

A second attack came as soon as the first had failed. The few trees that had survived the creature's blast creaked and groaned as they were pulled out of the ground. No matter how I looked at it, this was a cantus user at work.

Could the fiend have come here? My mind went numb. If he had, I was done for…

I stopped the trees and felt the jarring sensation of two cantus coming into contact. A shimmering rainbow appeared in the air.

"Wha-what…?" came a surprised voice.

I yelled as loud as I could, "Stop! I'm human!"

The trees thudded to the ground. So I was right. Whoever it was had attacked because they mistook me for a queerat.

"Wait, I'm coming out now!"

I emerged from the forest, waving my hands above my head. A person stood about fifty or sixty meters away, looking dumbstruck. A boy, maybe fifteen or sixteen years old. He came running over when he saw me.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were a queerat…"

"Be more careful! If I had died, death feedback would've killed you too."

"Death feedback?"

He looked like a good kid.

"Oh right, you wouldn't know about that. Anyway, always make sure what you're using cantus on."

"Okay. …but the queerats will jump at you out of nowhere."

His name was Susumu Sakai, a fourth year student at Sage Academy. I asked Susumu about what happened in the district last night and was surprised by what he told me. Even though he was still a kid, he volunteered to join the fight against the queerats and thus had firsthand knowledge of some of the things that occurred.

After the attack at the square, people were eager to take revenge on the queerats and broke up into groups of five to hunt them down. Around the time we arrived at the hospital and fought the queerats inside, the town too was embroiled in a furious battle.

Since they could not fight cantus users head on, the queerats waged an all-out guerrilla war.

Its great success was attributed to Yakomaru's tactic of ruthlessly sacrificing his solders as well as our complete lack of preparation. The queerats broke into empty houses to wait for the fight to start. We should have destroyed the buildings along with the queerats right from the beginning, but no one thought that kind of sacrifice was necessary.

Also, even though we were told that each person in a team of five is to keep watch in a different direction, we lacked proper training and forgot everything in the heat of battle. The queerats set up decoys to focus our attention in one area and shot us from behind. Many lives were lost in this way.

Surprised by this turn of events, many groups decided to band together. But this too was part of Yakomaru's strategy.

Teams of false humans distributed themselves among real human groups under the cover of darkness. They would then look for an opportunity to attack a human and cause absolute mayhem. It wasn't just people who were mistaken for false humans that were killed, the ones who killed them also died of death feedback.

Over three hundred people died in that nightmare of a battle. Although the number of queerats killed was double or triple that, it wasn't nearly enough to make up for the human lives lost.

As dawn arrived, Yakomaru's other troops began to appear. The queerats had kept up their attack on and off throughout the night, but stopped as the night ended and we killed the last of the false humans. As it turned out, this too was part of the plan and was designed to deprive us of sleep.

So as the queerats drew back, people started to relax. That's when the powder-spewing monsters appeared.

These creatures had swum upstream during the night and infiltrated the district. Even though they were as large as fin whales, everyone was too distracted by the fighting to notice them, and the queerats deliberately avoided fighting near the canals in order to keep us from seeing them.

As the battle slowed, seven or eight of the monsters rose above the water and spewed black powder all over town. The locations they covered were carefully calculated to cause maximum damage upon detonation. Then the explosions were set off before anyone even realized what was going on.

The blast waves and flying debris did massive damage to the population. The ensuing chain of explosions sucked up all the oxygen in the air and killed even more people.

"We would have died if Shisei Kaburagi hadn't protected us. …but my teacher died in the explosion. And I don't know where my parents are, I've been looking for them all by myself," Susumu said in a choked voice.

"Then why did you attack me all of a sudden? It could have been your parents."

"Because you were in the forest. We were all warned not to go in there. They said that the queerats might be hiding inside, or that you might be attacked by another person on accident."

"Oh. I didn't know."

I was worried sick about my parents, but it didn't seem like Susumu had any news about them. There was only one other question I had to ask.

"Susumu, have you heard or seen anything…worse?"

He pursed his lips. "Worse? Isn't this bad enough? All this happened in just one night."

"Yeah. Sorry for the weird question."

So it seemed the fiend hadn't appeared yet. That only made it even more important for me to warn everyone about him. It would be even better if I could find Tomiko or Shisei Kaburagi.

Susumu and I started walking, doing our best to keep our backs to each other so we could keep better watch on our surroundings.

We came to the canal. It was completely dry, just as I'd seen in from the air.

"Why isn't there any water?"

Susumu's answer was exactly as I expected.

"The leaders ordered people to close the dams and drain the canals as a precaution."

"Because queerats were hiding in them?"

"Yeah. And I think because that's how the powder-spewing monsters got in. They also said that there are some queerats that are amphibious."

The network of canals and waterways wound through Kamisu 66 like a web. It was hard to run surveillance on all of it, so draining it was the obvious thing to do. But Yakomaru had been one step ahead of the humans this entire time, so we were once again playing right into his hands.

Maybe the enemy wasn't predicting our actions, but controlling them.

Once the canals were drained, transporting a large amount of people would be nearly impossible. They had anticipated this, and more.

After a while, we began seeing people here and there. At first I was relieved, but my heart soon sank from what I saw.

A young woman crying over a dead body. A man with a terrible gunshot wound moaning in pain. Lost children searching desperately for their parents.

Everyone looked beseechingly at us as we walked past, as if begging us to save them. I wanted to help, but there was no time. If the fiend made his way here, the situation would become even more hellish than it already was. I had to find the town leaders before then so they could come up with a solid plan.

"Please…help."

A middle-aged woman lying in the middle of the road stretched her hand out toward us. Her clothes were charred black, and the exposed parts of her face and arms were horribly burned. She probably wouldn't survive for long.

"Water. I need water."

I bit my lip. I couldn't stand leaving her here to die. But if I didn't make it back in time, there would be no saving anyone.

"I'll help her," Susumu said, starting toward her. "Hurry and go! You said you had to get to the leaders, right?"

"Yeah…thank you."

I shook Susumu's hand and turned to go.

"Wait," the woman called to me. "Who…are you looking for so urgently?"

"I have to go find Tomiko-sama or Shisei Kaburagi and give them some information. If I don't, something even more terrible is going to happen…"

I stopped. It was beyond insensitive for me to say "something even more terrible" to someone who was on the brink of death.

"Tomiko is…at school. Taking shelter at Sage Academy. The buildings there are still standing," she said, coughing painfully.

A wave of relief washed over me. This woman was probably a member of the Ethics Committee. I might have been able to recognize her if not for the burns on her face.

"Thank you." I bowed to her and left at a quick jog.

It was a huge help knowing where to go. Now I just had to get there as fast as possible.

I increased my pace and broke into a run. The exhaustion I had felt just a second ago was completely gone.

It was my first time visiting Sage Academy since graduation. Our town was so small that I could've visited at any time, but I didn't have great memories of my time there so naturally I avoided it. As I got closer, the surrounding streets started bringing up memories of the past. Although the destruction here was considerably less than the town center, a good number of the buildings were partially ruined. The sight of it made my chest ache.

It started raining, even though the sky was as blue as before. Just as I thought that we were going to have a sunshower, the clouds started drifting in.

Just as I got to Sage Academy, the rain started pouring down. I was stopped at the door by someone who looked to be a member of the Committee.

"Due to the emergency situation, the Ethics Committee has appropriated this building for its uses. You may not enter," said the short, middle-aged man.

I remembered meeting him before. He worked for Tomiko, and I think his name was Niimi.

"I'm Saki Watanabe from the Exospecies Division of the Department of Health. I have urgent news that I must tell Tomiko-sama."

"…please wait here," he said, and went inside.

I stepped under the eaves to shelter myself from the rain and waited for him to come back.

"This way, please."

I followed Niimi through the familiar halls. The school building was sturdily built and in no danger of collapsing, but the blasts had knocked things off the wall and broken the glass windows. The floor was such a mess there was almost no place for me to put my feet. I thought Tomiko would be in the principal's office, but instead Niimi led me to the infirmary.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Come in."

The voice that answered was undoubtedly Tomiko's. I felt instantly relieved knowing she was alright.

"Saki?"

"Yes…"

I was shocked to see Tomiko lying on one of the infirmary beds. Her head was wrapped in bandages that covered both her eyes, one arm was in a sling, and she was covered in cuts and bruises.

"I'm glad you're okay."

"You're wounded…"

"It's not as bad as it looks. They're mostly cuts from broken glass. I never thought that powder-spewing monster would appear once morning came."

She smiled, but soon her expression became serious.

"But more importantly, what did you need to tell me?"

"Right…the worst has happened."

I summarized what we saw at the hospital.

"I'm absolutely sure it's a fiend. If we don't come up with a plan right now, we're all doomed."

Tomiko was quiet for a few moments.

"…I can't believe it. I trust you, but I just can't believe it."

"I'm not lying! I saw it with my own eyes! Not the fiend himself, but I saw him murder two people!"

"But it doesn't make sense. Why would a fiend appear now? The Board of Education has been keeping a tight hold on all the children. There shouldn't be any children that show even the slightest hint of Raman-Klogius syndrome."

"I don't know how or why it happened. But who else other than a fiend could kill another human with cantus?"

She fell silent again.

"Please believe me. If we don't do something, there will be no way to save the situation."

"But Saki," she said hoarsely, "if it really is a fiend, there's nothing we can do."

"That can't be…!"

"I suppose…the fiend must have somehow made his way here from a different district. In that case there really isn't any way for us to kill him. We can send impure cats after someone before they awaken as a full fiend, but once it's happened…we can only pray for a miracle. Pray that he accidentally hurts himself, or becomes ill, or something."

"But two centuries ago the towns managed to recover from the fiend's attack. Didn't you live to see it?"

"Yes, I did. That's why I vowed never to let another fiend appear again. The district will not survive a second attack," Tomiko said in a low voice. "We were beyond lucky last time. We won't be this time. Not when the queerats have already caused so much trouble…"

She stopped, as if realizing something.

"It can't be a coincidence. The queerats' attack and the fiend's appearance must be related. But how…?"

There was shouting outside. My heart almost flew out of my chest. The voice was coming closer. It wasn't just one person. A whole crowd of people was shouting.

"Niimi, why the commotion?" Tomiko asked.

Niimi and I peered out the window. People were running around in a panic in front of the school. I understood instantly what was happening.

Someone in the crowd shouted, "Fiend!"

So he was here… Fear and despair almost brought me to my knees.

"Saki, you have to leave right now," Tomiko commanded.

"We'll go together!"

"I'm staying. I'll only slow you down."

"But…!"

"Pass through the Holy Barrier and go to the Temple of Purity. The Security Council meets there in times of emergency to recuperate. If your parents survived, they should be there as well."

I felt my heart begin to beat again. There was still hope, however small it may be.

"Do you remember what I said a long time ago? I meant it when I said you would be my successor. I'm sorry you have to succeed me in such a fashion, but I'm leaving Kamisu 66 in your care."

"Wait. I can't…that's-"

"Niimi, please go with Saki."

He faltered. "If you will not escape, neither will I."

"No. You have another task to do. Please tell Shisei what you heard here. If the fiend is really heading this way, broadcast the news from the town hall. Warn as many people as possible that they are to run as far as they can."

"…understood." He stood at attention, head bowed.

"What are you waiting for? Go!"

I stood there, unsure of what to do. Niimi grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the room.

"Wait! Tomiko will…"

"This is her wish," Niimi said, tears rolling down his cheeks.

I felt myself about to cry as well.

Tomiko Asahina first encountered a fiend when she was around my age. In the two hundred years that have passed since then, she had continued to protect the district. She had stayed, for better or for worse, and now, she would sacrifice herself to keep us safe.

But I couldn't wallow in sentimentality forever. I was strong. So I had to do everything I could. I kept telling myself that.

If I didn't, the fear of what lay ahead would have broken me.

The terrified townspeople were running around like a herd of lemmings. They were incapable of following anyone's orders.

"Watanabe-san, please proceed to the Temple of Purity as Tomiko-sama advised," Niimi shouted above the din.

"What about you?"

"I will relay Tomiko-sama's message to Kaburagi Shisei."

"Then I'll go with you. I'm the only one who knows there's really a fiend out there."

Even if Kaburagi Shisei heard the townspeople panicking about the fiend, he might think they were simply overreacting, or that it was just another of the enemy's tricks. After Koufuu Hino, he was the only person who could do anything against the fiend, so I had to tell him everything I knew as soon as possible.

We walked along the edge of the road, taking care to avoid being swallowed up by the crowd. In such a packed space, no one could use cantus. The sight of everyone scrambling to save themselves made us seem more like our primitive ancestors than exalted beings with god-like powers. We were regressing, becoming cave-dwelling troglodytes who believed in ghosts and trembled at the sound of howling winds.

The sky was covered with dull, leaden clouds. The rain that had come all of a sudden had trickled to a stop.

"Kaburagi Shisei should be here," Niimi said. "Earlier, all the uninjured people cleared out an area and set up a first-aid tent. Then they reformed into new patrol groups."

"But all these people…"

My heart sank looking out at the sea of people. How was I going to find Kaburagi Shisei in this mess?

As I pushed my way to the front of the crowd, the sky above suddenly brightened.

Giant, glowing words appeared in front of the backdrop of clouds.

Please stay calm.
There is nothing to fear.
I will protect everyone.

The words had a dramatic effect. People stopped when they saw it, and slowly managed to regain their senses.

"Terror paralyzes the mind. That is what the enemy is counting on. Everyone please stay calm."

Shisei Kaburagi appeared, floating above the crowd. A mask like the ones used in the Demon-Chasing Festival covered his eyes. His cantus-amplified voice reverberated in all directions more clearly than any megaphone could manage.

"The fiend is just another of the queerat's devilish tricks in their rebellion against us. Because of them, numerous lives have been lost. Though we grieve for the fallen, now is the time for us to stand united."

There was the sound of applause. It spread through the crowd until everyone was clapping.

"Yes!"

"United!"

Shouts came from every direction.

"Death to the queerats!" Shisei Kaburagi declared.

The crowd took up the chant.

"Death to the queerats!"

"Death to the queerats!"

"Death to the queerats!"

They yelled in unison, fists punching the air.

Without Kaburagi Shisei's charisma, I doubted anyone could have calmed their panic so quickly. He had an impressive ability to manipulate human emotions. Only a strong emotion like anger could have chased away their fear. Then he fanned their anger to incite them to action. It was a risky move, but necessary all the same.

But now that I think about it, all of this had probably been anticipated by Yakomaru's meticulous calculations.

The timing of the fiend's appearance. The movements of the crowd. And even Kaburagi Shisei's speech at the square.

Without warning, the ground shuddered and collapsed. Before they even had time to scream, dozens of people were swallowed by the gaping hole that opened up under them.

The sinkhole was about a hundred meters in diameter, large enough to take out the entire square. The pit stopped right in front of me, and its center was right where Kaburagi Shisei had stood in the crowd.

I have to wonder if at that point, the queerats had surpassed us in civil engineering technology. Even now, we can only speculate about how they managed to collapse such a large area in the blink of an eye. Perhaps they had used their innate tunneling skills to create a network of tunnels below the square to weaken it, and then dug a larger cavern below that.

To trigger the collapse, they probably brought in a small powder-spewing monster. All they needed was a small explosion to bring down the already weakened structure and send hundreds of people plunging to their deaths.

The cloud of debris from the collapse blocked out everything in my field of vision. I covered my face to keep the grit from getting in my eyes.

"Run!" Niimi shouted, grabbing my hand.

"But I have to tell Kaburagi…!"

"There's no point. Not anymore," he said, coughing from the dust.

I didn't believe that Kaburagi Shisei could die so easily. But no matter how powerful he was, there simply hadn't been time for him to use his cantus.

As we turned and ran in the other direction, rain began to fall once again. At first it was just a drizzle, but soon it started coming down almost as hard as before.

I looked up and was surprised to see that the rain was confined to a tiny area. Namely, only the places that had been obscured by dust.

The rain stopped abruptly and a strong wind kicked up, blowing away what was left of the dust.

Kaburagi Shisei was standing in the same spot as before. Well, it's probably more accurate to say he was floating, since the ground was no longer there.

There were numerous people hovering around him, held up by his power. They looked on dazedly as Kaburagi Shisei moved them slowly to the edge of the hole and set them down.

"I am deeply ashamed I couldn't save everyone," he said, his voice full of anger and bitterness. "But we will avenge them. Let us vow to eradicate these cursed and ugly creatures from the land of the gods, from the archipelago of Japan…"

A loud blast interrupted his speech.

Queerats had appeared from a tunnel leading to the sinkhole and were firing in formation. Another troop appeared from a different tunnel and shot hundreds of arrows into the air. They had only one target: Kaburagi Shisei.

But before they could reach their target, the bullets and arrows vanished, as if transported to a different dimension.

"Your tenaciousness is quite admirable. But unfortunately, you are powerless before me."

The queerats were pulled out of the hole by an invisible hand. There were hundreds of them.

"Is there one that speaks our language?" he asked.

No one spoke. The queerats seemed to know that they couldn't escape and were quietly waiting for the end.

"Don't think I'll have pity and let you die peacefully if you stay silent. Not after your egregious betrayal."

The queerats began to writhe in agony.

"Unbearable, isn't it? I'm sending pain signals through your nerves. There's no real injury being done, so you won't die from it. I can keep this up until someone talks."

One suddenly cried out.

"St-stop!"

"Oho. You're quite fluent. Where's your supreme commander?"

"Kii! I don't know…ghh!"

The tortured queerat squirmed, foaming at the mouth.

"Death! Death! Death!"

The crowd seemed to have regathered its wits and began chanting again.

"Tell me! Or else…" Kaburagi Shisei lowered his voice threateningly.

But the queerat suddenly spasmed and went limp, eyes rolled back, drooling and moaning senselessly.

"I must have exceeded its pain threshold," Kaburagi Shisei muttered.

The now-useless queerat went up in a gout of white flame, and dropped back into the hole.

A piercing scream came from somewhere far behind us.

I turned and was confronted by an otherworldly spectacle.

People were swirling through the air like confetti. Some slammed into nearby buildings and left vivid blossoms of blood on the walls.

"Fiend!"

The street instantly fell into terrified chaos. But there was nowhere to run.

"A fiend? Impossible…that's impossible."

He began descending toward us.

The queerats hanging in midair seemed to have outlasted their purpose, and exploded one by one. Their bones were torn out, and the limp corpses disappeared into the sinkhole, trailing long, bloody intestines.

I heard a high-pitched shriek like that of a raging beast.

In the blink of an eye, a dozen people were engulfed in flames. They writhed and screamed, then toppled to the ground. Niimi wrapped his arms around me protectively and pushed me into the gap between two buildings.

An eerie silence followed the screams. All the survivors had, like us, found places to hide and were trembling in fear.

The fiend came down the center of the street.

There was no way to get a good look. I concentrated my entire being listening to his quiet footsteps.

My heart was racing, as if it were trying to pack a lifetime's worth of work into the next few seconds before everything ended.

But…

I caught a glimpse of the fiend from beneath Niimi's arm and found myself unable to look away. It was the scariest thing in the world, but I just couldn't tear my eyes from him.

He was so small. The size of a queerat, or maybe a child.

No. I was right, it was a human child. A boy, about nine years old.

He was dressed in a military outfit and his arms and face were decorated with intricate blue tattoos. He stared straight ahead at Shisei Kaburagi.

"Are you really a fiend…? But why? Who are you?" Shisei Kaburagi shouted.

My eyes went wide.

This was my first time ever seeing the boy. But I knew exactly who he was.

His refined features resembled Maria's almost perfectly.

And his hair was the same vibrant red, with Mamoru's untamable curliness.

The fiend was a memento of two people from the distant past.

"Grrr…★✻∀§▲ЖАД!" he shrieked in a high, wild voice.

A couple roof tiles lifted into the air and shot toward Shisei Kaburagi like bullets. They hit an invisible wall and disintegrated.

Tree roots began creeping out of the pit. The next second the supporting beams of the houses on both sides came bursting through the walls.

But the attacks were useless. Before the beams could crush Shisei Kaburagi, they were broken into a million splinters. The tree roots went up in flames before they could wrap around his legs.

"≠✻□□И…Ё▼ЮΣ."

The fiend suddenly stopped short. He stared at Shisei Kaburagi, as if puzzled that his prey was putting up such a fight.

"It's useless. I can easily see through your primitive attacks," he declared. "In any case, let's see how I can deal with you."

The houses on either side of the fiend collapsed as the ground slid away under them. Even the cobblestones crumbled into sand and sank like an antlion's trap. The fiend jumped away with the dexterity of a wild animal, a look of surprise on his face.

"Saki!" a voice called from behind.

I leapt up and saw Satoru standing there with a sorrowful expression on his face.

"Satoru…you're okay!"

"We have to run. The outcome here is already decided."

"Huh? But…"

Shisei Kaburagi and the fiend were at a stalemate. It was impossible to tell who was more skilled, and neither of them seemed to be able land the winning blow.

"Right now, Shisei's bluff is keeping the fiend at bay, but he'll see through it sooner or later."

"See what?"

"That Shisei can't kill another human, even a fiend, because of attack inhibition and death feedback. …but that doesn't apply to the fiend."

"But, wait. The fiend can't defeat him either, right?" Kaburagi can deflect all of his attacks," Niimi said.

"No, it's simple for the fiend."

"That…"

A previously forgotten memory suddenly flitted through my mind.

Shisei Kaburagi slowly approached ■, who was still staring fixedly at the chicken egg.

Everyone was waiting for an historic encounter. ■ was the one expected to inherit Shisei Kaburagi's mantle in the future. This could be the first time he receives advice from him.

But Shisei Kaburagi's steps suddenly halted.

What was wrong? He took one, two steps backwards, then turned on his heel and quickly left the classroom as everyone watched in a daze.

Cantus leakage. I had forgotten about that for so long. At this moment, what exactly was the unbeatable Shisei Kaburagi afraid of?

"Gaaaaaah!"

Shisei Kaburagi let out an unearthly scream. It was more than just a normal scream, it sounded like the shrieks of someone about to die.

His head tilted upward and the golden mask fell away, revealing his eyes with their four terrible irises. But the shadow of death was already upon them.

"Run! We have no time!"

Satoru pulled at me and we ran. Not back the way we came, but past the fiend and toward Shisei Kaburagi.

The fiend completely ignored the three of us. His attention was fixed on Shisei Kaburagi.

I looked back and saw an iridescent light surrounding Shisei Kaburagi's head. The interference pattern of two cantus pushing against each other.

The fiend was using its power directly on Shisei Kaburagi's body. All Shisei could do was fight against the fiend's cantus.

There was a dry snapping sound.

His head was twisted at an impossible angle. That was my last view of Shisei Kaburagi.

The giant pit at the center of the square was right in front of us. It was unbelievably large, and so deep I couldn't see the bottom.

We leapt desperately into it.

6

We fell down the pit that seemed to extend all the way to the center of the Earth. It was the final resting place for dozens of humans and queerats. The bottom was too dark to make out, rendering cantus useless. I flipped over to face the sky and imagined throwing a grappling hook over the edge of the hole. I managed to swing myself over to the wall.

The stone was still wet and slippery from the rain. It was humid in the pit, and the explosion had depleted most of the oxygen in the air, making it hard to breathe. A miasma of blood and burnt flesh wafted all around us.

"Saki, are you alright?"

It was Satoru's voice. He appeared to have found a place to land far above me.

"I'm here! How's Niimi?"

"I'm okay."

I couldn't see around the rocks, but his voice was closer than I expected.

"I see a tunnel just below me. Let's go in there."

A green flame flickered on the wall. I was blinded for a second, but managed to mark the spot where it had come from. A red afterimage drifted across my field of view.

I imagined myself sticking to the rock face like a compass needle on a magnet. Once I was secure, I started climbing slowly up the wall like a gecko.

From beyond the pit, I could hear a cacophony of screams and falling buildings. The fiend must have started his slaughter. I bit my lip. There was nothing we could do right now. All I could do was pray that at least some people could manage to escape.

I closed my eyes and tried to slow my frantically beating heart. I had to concentrate on getting out. There should still be some time before the fiend turns his attention to the pit.

Satoru was already waiting inside the tunnel when Niimi and I arrived.

"Hurry! Get inside."

He pulled us up one by one.

The tunnel was only a meter and a half tall, forcing us to stoop to fit inside. It smelled even worse in here. I thought my nose would wither from the stench.

"What is this smell?"

"I think they used mortar made of feces and dirt to reinforce the tunnel," Satoru said, pinching his nose.

"Why would they do that?"

"To speed things up as much as possible, I suppose. They really pulled out all the stops for this war."

Niimi spotted a torch on the ground and lit it. The smell was still stifling, but now we could see a little ways down the tunnel. The ground was littered with all sorts of debris. Grass, twigs, dead bugs, and more. I assumed this was the remains of their food.

"Take a look at this," Niimi said.

There was a large bloodstain in the ground, with smeared tracks leading from it.

"There's an injured queerat here. Be careful, it might still be alive," Satoru whispered.

We followed the trail farther down the tunnel and saw the queerat lying ahead. At first glance it looked dead, but then I saw its chest rising and falling slightly.

"Look, its left arm is missing…" Satoru pointed.

Its left arm was cut off at the shoulder, and it held a bloody sword in its right hand.

"Kaburagi Shisei probably caught it by the arm, so it cut it off to escape."

"I can't believe they'd go to these extremes…" Niimi said.

"Back when Kaburagi Shisei pulled the soldiers out of the pit, most of them were naked. This one is wearing metal armor, so it has to be at least a general. It knew it had vital information that couldn't be revealed to the enemy so it had to get away at all costs."

"…should we put it out of its misery?"

"No, we'll make it talk if it still can. …don't worry, the fiend won't come after us so we have some time."

Satoru pulled the queerat's sword away. It seemed to regain consciousness and looked toward us, eyes glowing red in the light of the torch.

"You. Answer our questions honestly and I'll give you a quick and painless death," Satoru said, crouching in front of the queerat. "You look like you've been through hell. Why do you go this far to rebel against us? I don't understand what's going through your heads."

The queerat just stared at him from its position on the ground.

"What is it? You speak our language, don't you? It's too late to pretend you don't."

"There's no need to deceive you," it replied in a calm, almost conversational tone.

"I see. So tell me. Where's Yakomaru now?"

The queerat shut its mouth and refused to answer.

"Yakomaru is lying to all of you. Why can't you see that? He doesn't value the lives of you soldiers at all."

"The lives of soldiers? Please. The lives of individuals are meaningless before a greater cause."

"What greater cause?"

"The liberation of our entire species from your tyranny."

"What tyranny? I don't think we've ever treated you badly." I spoke without meaning to.

"We are an intelligent species. We ought to be treated as your equal. Yet with your devilish powers, you've robbed us of our dignity, and treat us like animals. The only way we can restore our pride now is to wipe you off the face of the Earth."

"Do you really think you can do that?" Satoru shouted indignantly. "You've killed a lot of people with your cowardly attacks. But a single survivor is enough to slaughter you all!"

"That will not happen. Not as long as the hero of our liberation, Squealer, who you call Yakomaru, is with us. As well as the messiah heaven has sent us."

"Messiah? The fiend?"

"Fiend? …you are the fiend!"

The queerat leapt up from all fours and made to attack Satoru.

The tunnel flashed with iridescent light as our cantus collided. The queerat hurtled through the tunnel and smashed against the exposed rocks.

"Shit!" Satoru shouted, but it was too late.

The queerat was very obviously dead.

"He jumped at us so we'd kill him…"

"Let's go," Niimi said. "We can't linger here. I must fulfill the final task Tomiko-sama left me. The two of you should get to the Temple of Purity."

We hurried through the narrow tunnels, sweating and gasping in the stinking air, searching for the exit to the surface that we were sure was somewhere along here. Satoru believed we had a good chance of escaping as the fiend most likely wouldn't be able to dig out a deep enough shaft to cut off our path ahead of us. But if he finished his slaughter early, there was the danger that he would arrive first at the tunnel exit and wait for us.

I remembered what happened at summer camp fourteen years ago. Finding our way through the maze of tunnels had seemed like an insurmountable task, but compared to what was happening now, it seemed like a nothing more than a child's dare.

So many people had died, and I still had no idea whether my parents were safe. And now we probably didn't even have a town to return to anymore.

I fought hard to keep tears from falling down my face.

Koufuu Hino and Shisei Kaburagi, both unparalleled in their power, were dead. We had nothing left to fight the fiend. But we couldn't give up. This was the real test of courage–how far you could continue to go when the future looked completely hopeless. This was our test.

I couldn't give up. Tomiko had entrusted the towns to me. Just this thought alone gave me strength.

We came across a shaft to the surface about two hundred meters into the tunnel. The exit was located in the space between tree roots and cleverly camouflaged by grass. I was shocked that they had the audacity to place the exit so close to town.

After making sure there were no enemies around, we came to the surface.

Usually, we could have taken a canal and gotten out of here. But most of the waterways had been drained as a countermeasure against the powder-spewing monster, and the few main canals that remained usable were undoubtedly closely watched by the enemy.

Satoru and I had no choice but to make for the Tone River on foot. Niimi parted with us here.

"I hope the best for you both," he said, clasping our hands.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?" Satoru pleaded, but Niimi shook his head.

"No, I must go to the town hall. Those were Tomiko-sama's orders."

"But isn't it too late to make the announcement? Most of Hayring is already…"

"I don't know whether it's too late or not. But if my warning can save one extra life, it will not be in vain."

Niimi had made up his mind. We each went our separate ways and that was the last we ever saw of Niimi.

We climbed a hill, forcing a path through the long summer grass. I was drenched in cold sweat from the fear that the fiend might pop up behind us at any moment. Turning back, I saw ominous black smoke rising from the center of town.

Like before, our progress was slow as we had to watch out for queerats waiting to ambush us.

As we finally left Hayring, the announcement from the town hall came drifting through the air.

Emergency announcement. Emergency announcement. A fiend has appeared. A fiend has appeared. Its name and type are unknown, but it is suspected to be a Klogius type 1 or 2 variant. It is suspected to be a Klogius type 1 or 2 variant. The fiend has attacked Hayring and claimed many casualties. I repeat. The fiend has attacked Hayring and claimed many casualties. Please make your escape with all haste. All present at the town centers please evacuate immediately. Those near the outer edges should continue moving as far away from the towns as possible…

It was Niimi's voice. Satoru gripped my shoulder tightly. Niimi had made it to the town hall faster than we had expected. He had probably run there at full speed, heedless of the risk of being discovered by queerats or the fiend.

The announcement was repeated. To clarify what Niimi said, Raman-Klogius syndrome is divided into two main types. The disordered type is called Raman, and is further subdivided into variants numbered 1 through 4. The ordered type is called Klogius, and comprises variants 1 through 3. The two types differ in their destructive behavior, so the plans in place for escaping from them are also different.

The broadcast switched to an old analog recording of a musical piece.

Of course, it's not an original recording from the ancient civilization. A duplicate of an old performance was created by carving grooves onto a ceramic plate with cantus.

The piece was "Going Home", the second movement of Dvorak's New World Symphony. I don't know why Niimi chose this piece. Why, when our towns were being destroyed, did he choose the song that signaled for children to return home at the end of the day?

There were no vocals in the recording, but the lyrics automatically appeared in my mind as I listened.

The sun sets over the distant mountains
Stars stud the sky
Today's work is finished
My heart feels light
In the cool evening breeze
Come, gather around
Gather around

The bonfire burning brightly in the darkness
Now dies down
Sleep comes easily
Inviting me to disappear
Gently watching over us
Come, let us dream
Let us dream

The melody looped endlessly.

"It seems like Niimi managed to escape from the town hall. …we should go too," Satoru said.

"Yeah."

Although there was still some time before sunset, the melody seemed to be drawing the evening closer. Then I realized something. The broadcasting equipment in the town hall was powered by electricity from the only waterwheel generator in the entire district. But the canals had all been drained hours earlier.

Niimi was still in the building. He was powering the megaphones with cantus.

I was just about to tell Satoru when I caught sight of the grim look on his face. He had realized the same thing.

We continued walking in silence, crossing the canal beds toward the river. Even as we drew further away from the district, we could still hear snatches of music carried on the air.

Then it stopped.

I closed my eyes and grit my teeth, breathing slowly in and out to stop the tears from falling.

Niimi had known that Tomiko appointed me as her successor. I wonder if he intentionally lured the fiend to the town hall in order to ensure our safe escape to the Temple of Purity.

But I would never know the answer to that now.

We finally arrived at the Tone River after taking a detour to avoid the main canals. The river was crystal clear, and its swift rapids were as beautiful as ever, but I was in no mood to appreciate it. We searched the area for a boat, with no luck. In the end, we had to lash three fallen trees together to create a crude raft.

As we traveled up the river, the gentle rocking of the raft made the past 24 hours seem like a distant dream.

It was just a dream. It had to be. But the dozens of cuts and bruises on my body and the exhaustion that went all the way to my bones all screamed otherwise.

I was starting to feel lightheaded from the lack of sleep. So many stressful things had happened in the past few hours that my mind was having trouble processing it all.

At some point, I had begun to feel strangely apathetic toward it all.

A thousand years from now, all of us would be gone. And no one would know what had happened here. So what was the point of fighting so hard to stay alive?

"Saki, I think it's somewhere around here."

I didn't immediately understand what he was talking about.

"Do you remember where the entrance is?"

I finally realized that Satoru was asking about the way to the Temple of Purity.

"…no. But I think I remember that tree over there."

The location of the temple wasn't kept a secret, but it wasn't common knowledge either. During my initiation, I had been transported in a windowless houseboat, so I had no idea where we left the waterways and entered the river, or where we rejoined the canals again. I had dropped by the temple a number of times while doing fieldwork with Wildlife Preservation officers, but I couldn't seem to find the route we used.

"That's strange. I'm pretty sure this is the place."

"What now?"

Should we go ashore to search? If this wasn't the right spot, not only would we not find anything, but we'd also run the risk of being attacked by queerats.

"Excuse me! Is anyone there?" Satoru shouted.

"Stop it. What are you going to do if the fiend hears you?"

Satoru shook his head. "The bigger danger is the fiend catching up with us while we're still out here. We have to find the temple as soon as possible…excuse me! Is there anyone from the Temple of Purity?"

Surprisingly, a voice answered, "Who is it?"

"I'm Satoru Asahina, a biologist at the Lotus Farms. This is Saki Watanabe from the Department of Health. Tomiko-sama advised us to escape to the temple."

"Please wait a moment."

There was a creaking sound and the thicket right in front of our raft parted. The waterway continued onward into its depths.

"Please come this way."

I still couldn't see who had spoken. We pushed our primitive raft forward and the door disguised as a thicket closed behind us. The door's mechanism didn't look too complex, but it would be difficult to open without cantus. Despite its location, the entrance was fairly secure. From the river, it was almost unnoticeable, and approaching it from the bank was nearly impossible due to all the trees and boulders in the way.

The raft navigated through the tight turns of the waterway and arrived at a covered dock. It was the same place I had been taken to during my initiation. I remembered the canal being much wider, but perhaps that was in a different area.

"I'm glad you've made it here safely."

A monk appeared, his hands steepled in front of him. We bowed in return.

"I am the head monk of the administrative section of the Temple of Purity. My name is Jakujou. You must be tired. Please rest first; later we would like to ask you some questions."

One of the duties of the head monk was to look after visitors. We followed him up a covered flight of stairs. Once inside the temple grounds, we were shown into a tatami room, and food was brought to us. It was only rice with pickled turnips and plain water, but to us it was as good as any feast. We devoured everything in the blink of an eye.

We rested for a short while afterward. There were a million things I wanted discuss with Satoru, but I just couldn't muster up the energy. The apathy I had felt earlier washed over me again.

Jakujou's voice came from outside the door. "Satoru Asahina, Saki Watanabe, it pains me to ask this of you in your exhaustion, but would you please come with me to the main hall?"

"Alright," we answered in unison.

There were already a number of monks waiting in the main temple when we arrived. They seemed to be preparing to light the fire in the altar.

"Satoru Asahina and Saki Watanabe have arrived," Jakujou announced.

The room went silent.

"Oh, oh, good…"

It was Head Priest Mushin. He was already over a hundred years old, and seemed even more ancient than when I last met him.

"I hope Tomiko is well?"

I didn't know what to say, so I kept quiet, but my expression was probably all too easy to read. Head Priest Mushin closed his eyes.

Another monk, as skinny as a crane and not much younger than Mushin, spoke. He introduced himself as Gyousha, the chief priest of the temple. The chief priest is the second in command after Head Priest Mushin, and responsible for all the practical affairs of the temple. He looked familiar, and I seemed to recall seeing him at the Security Council meeting from a week ago.

"We hope to ask for your cooperation in this matter. I believe one of you was able to see the fiend in close proximity?"

"Yes, we both did," Satoru answered.

"Could you please describe it to us? How old it looked, its physical appearance, and such."

"The fiend…looked about ten years old," I said.

The monks stirred and muttered amongst themselves.

"Ten? That's the youngest I've ever heard."

"Even though he's still a child, his features are well developed. He has bright red hair and…"

I was absolutely sure that he was Maria and Mamoru's son, but I was hesitant to say this out loud. As Satoru and I described his appearance, the fire in the altar was lit. The flames rose toward the ceiling and the monks began to chant.

"I see. So the fiend looked something like this?"

An image of the fiend appeared in the fire as Chief Priest Gyousha spoke.

"Yes…exactly!" My voice shook as I recalled seeing the fiend in person.

"Thank you. Now, if you could please step back," Chief Priest Gyousha said, sitting down in front of the altar with Head Priest Mushin.

He poured fragrant oil into the fire and threw in some cedar sticks. Sparks flew into the air and the thirty or so monks began chanting in unison.

"Wait, I have a question…" I said to Gyousha, but Jakujou stopped me.

"Please direct your questions to me. Let's step outside."

"What is that prayer for?"

Jakujou looked slightly embarrassed as he paused to think.

"Actually, this information is not given to outsiders, but I will make an exception for the two of you. Right now, the entire Temple of Purity is channeling its energy into the fire in order to exorcise the fiend."

"Exorcise it? Is that possible?" I said, surprised.

"Of course, it is not an easy task. However, the light radiating from the North Star is the power of the Tejaprabha Buddha which halts the movements of all impure ghosts and demons. Vaisravana's power calms the spirits. One of the four major rituals of the shika daihou protects the land from disaster. The Usnisavijayadharani sutra, which brought the divine wind when the Mongols attacked the ancient civilization, along with the most powerful rite, the prayer of the one-syllable golden wheel, and several other rituals will be enough to exorcise the fiend," Jakujou whispered confidently.

"Has there been a successful exorcism in the past?" Satoru asked.

"The temple's archives document the sudden appearance of a fiend four hundred years ago. After three days and three nights of prayer, the fiend was exorcised. What's more, not a single life was lost."

"So…this kills the fiend?"

Jakujou expression darkened. "No. Killing was sanctioned in the past, but now we fully follow the Buddha's path and it is strictly forbidden."

"But the fiend has already killed a lot of people. If we could save many more lives by ending one, wouldn't that be the right thing to do?"

"That is why we are using prayer to exorcise the fiend. Like everyone else, we are unable to use cantus to kill another human being."

It seemed like there was no way to trick the attack inhibition and death feedback mechanisms that were baked into our DNA. But if it couldn't attack the fiend directly, what exactly was the use of the altar fire and prayer?

Satoru seemed to be wondering the same thing.

"So what effect does the prayer have?"

"It will restrict its movements and instill a feeling of shame in it to awaken its compassion so that it will stop its senseless killing."

If mere cantus leakage could alter the evolution of living things, I had no doubt the power the monks gained through years of training was even more potent. As Jakujou said, they wouldn't change the fiend physically, but mentally. That was probably the most peaceful method possible.

But wasn't this based on a huge misconception? All the fiends until this one had been part of our society at some point. In order to control the human side of the fiend, he needs to have human memories and emotions buried deep inside it. Then we could attempt to awaken those memories and hopefully make it stop killing.

But this fiend had never lived in our society. It didn't even speak our language. Physically, it was human, but mentally it was a queerat. I doubted that we could control any aspect of its behavior.

I wondered whether I should tell them about this. But there was something else I needed to ask first.

"Tomiko told me that in times of emergency, all members of the Security Council are to gather at the temple. Did my parents…Mizuho Watanabe, the head librarian, and Mayor Takashi Sugiura, make it here?"

Jakujou's answer surprised me.

"They have."

"Really? Where are they now?" I asked excitedly.

Seeing Jakujou's solemn expression made me feel like I had just been doused with a bucket of ice water.

"After meeting with Head Priest Mushin and Chief Priest Gyousha, they returned to the district. They left about two or three hours before you arrived."

That means we should have crossed paths on the Tone River.

"But…why?"

"Your parents were very worried about you. But they believed that you would eventually make it here and were determined to wait for you. News of the fiend's appearance came while they waited."

I stared unblinkingly at Jakujou, hanging on to his every word.

"Your parents decided that the fiend must be stopped regardless of the sacrifices necessary. So they returned to the district. First, to release all the tainted cats in the villages and set them on the fiend. Second, to destroy all the books in the library lest they fall into the queerats' possession."

"So…"

I felt my legs give out. If Satoru hadn't caught my by the shoulder, I would've collapsed on the floor.

Had my parents willingly gone to their deaths?

"I have something they asked me to give to you upon your arrival. I will bring it to you later."

"Let me see it now…please," I murmured, half in shock.

"Very well. Please wait a moment. However, there is another guest who wishes to see you right away."

I had already tuned out everything Jakujou was saying.

It was too late to go after them now. My parents had probably entered the fiend or the queerats' territory already. If that were the case, they wouldn't be coming back alive.

Would I lose both my parents at the same time? Just imagining it made me feel faint.

Satoru said something to Jakujou, then started guiding me down a long hallway, his arm still wrapped around me. It seemed like we were headed back to the visitor's quarters.

"Excuse me. I've brought Saki Watanabe and Satoru Asahina," Jakujou said, kneeling in front of a door.

"Please come in."

The voice sounded familiar.

The room behind the door had a wooden floor upon which stood a plain wooden bed. Although this room was also in the visitor's quarters, ours was considerably more comfortable.

"Watanabe-san, I'm glad you're unhurt. You too, Asahina-san."

A man sat on top of the bed. Even though his face was badly sunburned and covered with stubble, I recognized him instantly.

"Inui…"

There had been no news from the Wildlife Preservation officers after they had gone out to exterminate the Robber Fly colony, so we assumed the worst had happened.

"I'm ashamed to admit that not only did I fail my mission, but that all I could do was run away with my tail between my legs," he said, his head bowed.

"Don't be. Your opponent was a fiend, there was nothing you could've done."

Inui shook his head. "If only I had been able to return sooner and given the people more notice…we could have avoided the number of casualties."

"You left to annihilate the colony a week ago, right? What happened after that?"

Slowly, Inui began telling his story.

The Security Council had sent a team of five Wildlife Protection officers to exterminate two hundred thousand members of the Robber Fly colony within three days. But they didn't kill a single one. Somehow, the queerats had gotten wind that the officers were coming and the entire army had simply vanished underground.

They scoured the mountains for an entire day, and sent a message to the Department of Health by bird the next morning. The next two days were all the same, and their search ended unfruitfully. The event happened on the fourth day.

The five Wildlife Protection officers on the mission were all veterans and familiar with the queerats' fighting strategies and weaknesses, so they knew that when the queerats went into hiding, the worst thing to do would be to split up and search for them separately. It was a common tactic they used when dealing with multiple cantus users.

So that morning the officers set out together to hunt down the queerats. After a few hours, they finally came across the traces of a camp.

They found the troop about an hour later. About ten queerats were moving in and out of a cave dug into the foot of a mountain, bringing out weapons that had been hidden inside. Umino confirmed that they were members of the Tiger Moth colony, which was allied with the Robber Flies. The five officers split up to surround the queerats, though they kept close enough to provide backup for each other if needed.

Eliminating a small number of queerats is about as difficult as getting rid of a hornet nest. Two officers defend against counterattacks while the third kills the queerats and the two remaining officers keep watch over the area and either kill the queerats that try to escape or capture them for questioning. Inui was one of the patrols and had circled around to the right and perched himself on top of a large rock that gave a clear view of the battleground. The other patrol, Aizawa, had gone around to the left and was concealed in a hollow on the ground.

The attack began. If they realized humans were attacking them, the queerats would probably try to escape through other tunnels in the mountain and there was no way of knowing how many exits had been dug into the mountain. Kengo, who was attacking, used pebbles to create the sound of fake gunfire.

As expected, the Tiger Moths assumed it was a hostile colony attacking and began preparing to fight. They came out, sheltering behind stone and bamboo shields and began counterattacking. Kawamata shot the fake bullets into a wooded area a short distance away, and the Tiger Moths began concentrating their fire in that direction. After a while, the firing ceased and Tiger Moth soldiers started swarming out of the mountain.

At that moment, a soldier appeared from a tunnel higher up on the mountain and spotted Aizawa down below. Before it could even raise its bow, Inui killed it without making a sound. Judging from the camouflage cloak it was wearing, the soldier was probably a sniper who killed enemies from afar.

The battle below was decided within moments. Kawamata killed the oncoming queerats with brisk, practiced movements, while the defenders, Umino and Kamoshida, barely had to raise a finger.

Then something else appeared from the cave, its face hidden under a grey hood. Thinking that the remaining queerats were surrendering, Inui didn't kill them. The other four officers appeared to come to the same conclusion. No one attacked the approaching figure, but they all felt there was something strange about it.

Kawamata, Umino, Kamoshida, and Aizawa all went forward carefully, even though there was usually no need for four people to confront one queerat.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Kawamata asked.

It was then that Inui realized that the figure was human. It was difficult to tell from his position, but he estimated that it was about as tall as the average queerat, roughly the size of a human child.

What happened next was the stuff of nightmares.

Kawamata's head burst like a ripe melon, sending blood and brains flying everywhere. Umino, Kamoshida, then Aizawa all met the same fate.

Inui was too shocked to react. His heart pounded wildly in his chest and he broke out in a cold sweat. The only thing in his mind was the word 'fiend'.

When had calmed down a little, a thousand questions flooded through his head. Why was a fiend here? Why did it come out of the queerat tunnels? Who in the world was it?

But he had no time to ponder the answer to any of these questions. His mind immediately switched to a more pressing matter. How could he escape unscathed?

His first and strongest instinct was to just run as fast and far as possible. But Inui forced himself to calm down and think carefully. Then he stripped the camouflage cloak from the queerat he had killed earlier. He thought through his plan again. Yes, this was the correct choice.

If he were to leave his current position, he would end up in the middle of the queerat troops with no way to escape. There was no guarantee he would be able to fight them all off alone, and the appearance of the fiend only made the situation more dangerous.

Inui inched his way over to a better hiding spot and waited for the enemies to disperse. Unfortunately, the queerats seemed determined to stay. Inui suspected that they knew the "gods of death" always worked in teams of five. In that case, he was trapped.

The camouflage cloak proved to be a godsend. It even had a hood, so Inui was able to wrap the entire thing around himself, effectively concealing his own scent beneath the original owner's pungent odor. Even so, there was a moment when he was almost discovered. The queerats were marching right at him and Inui had to pass through their field of view in order to take cover in the woods. Thankfully, he was slight enough to pretend to be one of them by slouching and mimicking their movements and so remained undiscovered.

"…but it took all my skill to avoid being discovered, and escaping was impossible," Inui said bitterly. "Four days passed, and as I didn't have any food and no water apart from the dew I collected from the plants, my body was at its limit. In the middle of the fourth day…yesterday, the entire army started moving out. At first I wondered if this was some trap, but then I realized I had no time to waste. The moment the sun went down, I headed toward the district to warn everyone about the queerats and, more importantly, the fiend."

Inui crept over the hills toward Outlook. He had planned to ask for help from the first person he saw, but he didn't come across anyone. Then he remembered it was the night of the festival.

Most of the town would be empty. Inui was dismayed, but he knew there was one place where there would definitely be people around.

The nursery at the hospital.

The main hospital is in Gold, which is quite a distance from Outlook, but as luck would have it, the nursery is located in the center of Outlook. Inui changed course and headed to the nursery. He could see the fireworks bursting over Hayring and faintly hear the cheers of the crowd drifting over the air.

When he finally arrived at the nursery, he was greeted with the most shocking scene he had ever seen.

"Of course, I knew it was their custom. We saw at the end of every war between colonies, but we simply considered it another tradition of an inferior culture. But that they would do it to humans…!" Inui sputtered.

"Wait, you aren't saying that they-" Satoru couldn't even finish the question. He looked like he had been punched in the stomach.

"Yes. Those despicable creatures kidnapped the infants."

I recalled a scene from summer camp.

A large number of Giant Hornet soldiers came flooding out of the nest. Some of them carried something carefully in their arms.

"Those are…?" I realized before I finished asking.

Nestlings.

"There are many nurseries within the nest. These nestlings were all birthed by the Ground Spider queen."

"But, why?"

The satisfied look on Kiroumaru's face was almost repulsive. "These are treasured spoils of war. They are the workforce that will serve our colony in the future."

One of the soldiers brought a nestling to Kiroumaru. It hadn't yet opened its eyes and was reaching out with its front paws as if trying to touch something. Its pink skin made it look much more like a rat than its adult counterpart.

I remembered what Squealer had said.

"The queen is executed and the rest of the members become slaves. As long as they live they are treated as less than scum, and when they die they are left out to rot and fertilize the fields."

The nestlings had only a dismal future ahead of them.

My mind was reeling from this realization. I thought I was going to throw up.

Yakomaru's true goal that night had been to kidnap the infants.

"They slaughtered all the nurses with help from the fiend and rounded up all the infants. Not only that, but they tattooed them on the spot in that strange script they use."

After joining the Exospecies Division, I'd seen their script a number of times. It resembled kanji, but was somehow different. It was more like the Jurchen, Khitan, or maybe Tangut script.

"They're not just looking to double their investment…" Satoru said, his face going white. "They started with Maria's child. He grew into a fiend that even Shisei Kaburagi couldn't defeat. When the children they abducted awaken to their cantus in ten years…"

I understood what he was saying. This was the grand design Yakomaru had nurtured in secret.

Ideally, he would take Kamisu 66 with a single fiend. But if that didn't work, he only had to wait another ten years. I didn't know exactly how many children were in the nursery, but there had to be at least a hundred. Under the queerats' care, the children would all turn into fiends, and there wouldn't be a single community in Japan that could stand in his way. If Yakomaru then kidnapped all the children from those communities, he would have an entire army of fiends, and he could expand to the rest of the Far East and even Eurasia. World conquest would not be out of the question. It would be the birth of the great queerat empire.

"I still don't know what I should have done at the time. I probably should have headed to town immediately to report what I'd seen. But I couldn't. I was so disgusted by what I saw that I couldn't just leave without doing anything. So when a queerat appeared in front of me gleefully clutching a crying baby in its arms, I blew its head off without a second thought."

Inui's face was flushed with emotion.

"Of course, there was this big commotion. They were panicking because what had happened was obviously a cantus attack, but they couldn't pinpoint where it had come from. I managed to slip away in all the confusion. Of course, I hadn't planned any of it, I killed simply in the heat of the moment."

"But you still escaped unscathed," Satoru said.

"Not entirely. Even with the camouflage cloak, one of the soldiers got suspicious and shot me in the left arm. I tried to flee, but ran straight into the fiend. I didn't actually get a look at his face, but I'm positive it was the fiend."

"What did you do?" I asked, hardly daring to breathe.

"I was saved by the skills I learned. I ran away crying 'It hurts! It hurts!' in their language. My face was covered well enough that no one could see what I looked like, and I managed to get away."

Inui seemed happier now that he had gotten this off his chest and he began to speak more easily.

"Since Outlook was already under their control, I had no choice but to escape back into the wilderness. But then I started to lose consciousness. I was sure I would be captured this time, and to be honest, I was ready to accept that. But someone helped me when I had almost passed out. I opened my eyes, relieved that I'd finally found another human, but the one staring down at me was clearly a queerat. I thought this was the end. But he brought me all the way here."

"What do you mean a queerat helped you…" Satoru looked doubtful.

"It was Yakomaru's chief opponent, the leader of the Giant Hornet colony. Kiroumaru. I always thought he was a remarkable guy, but I never dreamed that he'd be the one to save me."

"So Kiroumaru is still alive? Where is he now?" I asked.

"Hm, good question. I'd just come to when Jakujou-san told me you had arrived, and I asked to see you. I completely forgot about Kiroumaru."

"Excuse me." Jakujou's voice came from outside the door. "Watanabe-san, I have the item your parents left in my care."

The plain wooden box was larger than I had expected, about 60 centimeters long. It felt quite heavy and there was an envelope stuck to the top.

"Thank you very much."

"Inui-san told us that Kiroumaru brought him here. Where did he go after that?"

"Oh…the exospecies member?" Jakujou said indifferently. "It's being held at the temple. Probably still being questioned."

"Can we see him?"

"I'm not sure."

I set the box down on the table and opened the letter.

7

The letter was hastily written with a brush pen in my mother's familiar handwriting. Just seeing that was enough to make me start crying.

Dearest Saki,

I write this letter, confident that you have made it safely to the Temple of Purity.

Although I do not know how we've arrived at the present situation, I do know that many have already died at the hands of the fiend that has descended upon the district. Right now, we must do everything in our power to stop it, so we are returning to the district. If we should die there, then that is our duty. It is said that knowledge is power, and knowledge is necessary to defeat the fiend. As the head librarian, I now pass that knowledge on to you.

Do not come after us. We will do everything we can to stop the fiend, but in the event that we fail, there is something you must do.

What I am about to write falls under class four, category three, "catastrophic". As such, please burn this letter after you have read it. Do not let personal feelings hold you back. Keep the best interests of the district in mind. Do not forget that you were chosen by Tomiko-sama.

Do you remember what I said about weapons of mass destruction at the Security Council meeting?

There was a time when weapons that could annihilate mankind many times over filled the earth. Most of them have been destroyed, and time has rendered the rest useless. I said that it's possible that supercluster bombs still exist, but even if they did, I can't imagine that they are still in working condition.

However, when I was looking through information on the bombs, I found another report. According to it, there is one weapon that could have survived a thousand years and into our time. Ironically, it is a weapon designed by those without cantus to wipe out cantus users. It had the disgusting nickname "psychobuster".

The psychobuster was developed by the Americans and secretly brought over by the military when they were stationed in Japan.

The section after that was titled "Tokyo" and filled with mantra-like script interspersed with numbers. I couldn't really understand what exactly the psychobuster was supposed to be.

Saki-chan, I'm sure you've already figured out the reason we need this horrible weapon.

We can't kill the fiend with cantus.

In the past, every time a fiend appeared in a town, mountains of corpses filled the streets and the rivers ran red with blood. Perhaps one way of looking at the fiend is as the result of our collective karma. In that case, there is no way for us to eliminate it.

After reading the accounts of attacks throughout history, I know that every era has had to suffer their share of fiends. There are also records of what I can only describe as divine intervention. Once, when buildings were being torn down and piled together to act as obstacles against the fiend, a piece of rebar just happened to ricochet right into the fiend's chest, killing it. The people tearing down the building died of death feedback, but ultimately, many lives were saved.

However, attempts to replicate the event all ended in failure. People who tried to destroy buildings near a fiend were all immobilized by attack inhibition. There were also attempts to hide the intent to murder through alcohol or narcotics, but unfortunately, none succeeded. No matter how hard you try, it is exceedingly difficult to deceive yourself.

Still, there was a hint to the solution in the most recent occurrence. 257 years ago, the fiend K was killed by one doctor's heroic actions. The doctor injected K with a lethal cocktail of drugs. Although he was killed by K soon after, K also died.

I don't know what would have happened to the doctor if K hadn't killed him. It's very possible that he would have died of death feedback, but the most important point is that he was somehow able to kill K.

I don't know to what extent the doctor was aware that he was injecting poison into K. Just writing this down makes me shudder in fear, but I believe that given a certain kind of medium, we would still be able to kill another human without using cantus.

As you would expect, records show that attempts to use bows and arrows and guns all ended in failure, as it's impossible to use these weapons without a definite intent to kill your opponent.

But the weapons of mass destruction developed by the ancient civilization have no such limitations. Hundreds of thousands of people can be killed with the press of a button, but while you may understand logically what you are doing, it doesn't feel real. In other words, it's a device that can override our conscience and abhorrence toward killing and make it possible to commit mass murder.

The psychobuster is considered a weapon of mass destruction, but it does not operate on as large a scale and is more suited for assassinations and terrorism. In any case, it's a weapon that does not make the user feel like they are killing, so attack inhibition will most likely not prevent you from using it. Perhaps even death feedback can be avoided as well.

Perhaps even a weapon as evil as this can save the lives of thousands of people like the blessed rain that comes after a drought.

We know the exact location where the psychobuster is kept. Normally, there would be no way to navigate there, but if the object in the box could somehow be activated, it should be able to lead you to it.

Saki-chan, you have a rare and valuable quality. In a word, I would describe it as strength. Though you cry and are discouraged, you never break. You always accomplish what you set out to do. We have always seen that in you and Tomiko-sama agreed whole-heartedly with us.

If the psychobuster exists, I'm sure you will find it. Please use it to save the lives of everyone in the district.

We love you from the bottom of our hearts, and will always watch over you wherever you go.

From your mother, Mizuho

I began to cry as I reached the end of the letter.

I passed the letter over to Satoru, who was watching me anxiously. Then I opened the box.

The object inside was about fifty centimeters long and looked kind of like a sea roach. It had a shell on its back made of parallel, overlapping plates inlayed with dark blue stripes.

"It's a false minoshiro…" Satoru whispered in surprise.

It was different from the false minoshiro I had seen before, but the overall resemblance was there. However, it didn't have a single feeler on its back and didn't look anything like a true minoshiro. I would've called it a fake false minoshiro, or maybe a copy false minoshiro.

"But does it still work?" I asked, wiping my eyes.

"I wonder. There's a piece of paper in the box. It might be an instruction manual or something."

I took out the paper and unfolded it. It had turned completely brown with age and was filled with unfamiliar, angular kanji explaining how to operate the fake false minoshiro.

April 11, year 129. Excavated from underground storage room No. 4 at the foot of Mt. Tsukuba.

Model number: Toshiba Solar Autonomous Archive, version SP-SPTA-6000

Operating instructions and notes:

① The unit must be placed in a sunlit area to charge the battery before powering on. After long periods of storage, required charging time is minimum six hours under strong sunlight. Battery may drain fully if used in dim areas for extended periods of time.

② To return the unit to hibernation mode, give the verbal command and ensure that the activity indicator lamp is turned off, then store the unit in a dark place.

③ When placed in security mode, the unit will obey commands, but may attempt to hypnotize you and escape when given the chance. You must be more wary of it than you are of wild animals.

④The unit was designed with long-lasting and age-resistant materials, but its ability to self-repair has reached its limits. Replacement parts are probably no longer available as the model is quite old.

⑤ There appears to be a faulty spot in the electronic circuit. Repair is impossible. When the unit begins to malfunction, power it down temporarily to prevent overheating.

⑥ As most of the information contained in the unit is class four, please exercise extreme caution when operating the unit. Under Ethics Committee regulations, all autonomous archives are to be destroyed immediately upon discovery, so knowledge of the existence of this unit must be kept strictly within library personnel.

"Year 129 was over a century ago. I really doubt that it still works," Satoru said.

"Let's put it under the sun and see."

The machine had probably been hidden away in the library storerooms underground for over a century. My mother had taken the time to find and bring it with her when she escaped, so I really hoped that it wasn't completely unusable.

We borrowed a metal cage from Jakujou and placed the fake false minoshiro in a sunny spot on the temple grounds. There was probably just enough time before sunset to give it a full charge. Only the gods knew if we would actually be able to use it.

"This way."

We looked skeptically at the place Jakujou indicated. It was a large cave in the bedrock of the hill behind the temple, the opening barred with a grid of sturdy wooden poles. No matter how I looked at it, it was obviously a dungeon.

"Why here?" Satoru asked, his brows furrowed.

"We cannot let an exospecies stay in the guest quarters. Least of all now, when the queerat rebellion has claimed so many lives."

"But Kiroumaru is the general of the Giant Hornet colony and loyal to humans. Not to mention he saved Inui's life. To keep him here…" I was at a loss for words.

"We received orders from the Ethics Committee to exterminate any and all queerats, regardless of their colony. These beasts are more than happy to turn traitor when they see the tides of battle turning," Jakujou said as he unlocked the gate.

His tone of voice suggested that not executing Kiroumaru was some kind of special favor.

The dark dungeon was hot and smelly.

"Look, Kiroumaru. You have guests who've come all this way to see you," Jakujou said.

From the far end, a large, dark shape came crawling forward on all fours. The ceiling looked too low for it to stand upright. I recognized Kiroumaru immediately. His glittering green eyes and complex tattoos that ran all the way down his muzzle. He was big for a queerat, and his face had a uniquely wolfish resemblance. One eye was scarred shut, his entire body was covered in unhealed wounds, and he had lost a lot of weight.

There was the rattle of chains as he approached. He braced himself on unsteady legs.

"Thank you for coming. It shames me that you had to come to such a foul place."

Even here, his tone of voice was unchanged: proud, with traces of cynicism.

"I'm Saki Watanabe. Do you remember me? This is Satoru Asahina…"

I turned to Jakujou, unable to bear it any longer.

"This treatment is uncalled for. Unchain him at least!"

"But we don't have permission from the chief priest…"

"Aren't they in the middle of the ritual right now? We'll get permission later," Satoru said decisively, breaking the chains on Kiroumaru's hind legs with cantus.

"This is a problem. You shouldn't have done that." Jakujou sounded distraught.

We ignored him.

"I remember you two well. I know Saki Watanabe-sama from the Exospecies Division, but Satoru Asahina-sama was still an innocent boy when we last met. You've grown into a fine man."

He walked right up to us, eyes narrowed against the light coming in from outside.

"I apologize for how you were treated… And thank you for saving Inui."

Kiroumaru grinned broadly. "Please, what I did was only natural. So what do you intend to do about the fiend?" he asked, getting straight to the point.

"An exospecies member has no business with our affairs! Know your place!" Jakujou shouted, but Kiroumaru pretended not to hear.

"The fiend wiped out my most elite troops," he said to us. "Our arrows were stopped mid-flight and our weapons were torn from us with cantus. We were helpless. Even if it is just a child, I must admit it is something to be feared."

"What happened after?"

"Although it could have killed us all in the blink of an eye, the fiend seemed to enjoy playing with us. My brave soldiers were shot, stabbed and tortured to death," Kiroumaru said, his expression unchanged.

"But you made it out okay."

Looking at his missing eye, I realized how utterly insensitive that sounded.

"I must say it's almost a miracle that I was able to escape. To allow me to escape, my elite troops advanced in close formation, but their weapons were ripped from them as if attracted by a giant magnet. They fought with their claws and fangs. I saw them being butchered out of the corner of my eyes as I ran by, passing no more than twenty or thirty meters away from the fiend, and dived into a ditch. I must have had heaven's protection."

"I see. The fiend has attacked our district… Don't worry, we will avenge your soldiers."

"But gods…humans cannot use cantus against each other, is that not so? In that case, how will you deal with the fiend?"

"How do you know that?" Jakujou yelped in surprise.

"The gods underestimate our intelligence. It is common knowledge among our kind. Naturally, that slimy bastard Yakomaru knows as well. I'm sure his strategy hinges on it," Kiroumaru replied, still not looking at Jakujou.

"Kiroumaru, how do you propose we defeat the fiend?" Satoru asked, perhaps expecting that a renown general like him would have some ideas.

"If the use of cantus is out of the question, we can only rely on the traditional tactics of my kind. Guns, poison arrows, traps… But the fiend is constantly surrounded by Robber Fly soldiers to protect him, so it won't be easy in any case."

As I expected, there was no magic solution.

"Right, I have another question. We're going to Tokyo after this–do you know anything that might help us?"

Kiroumaru's remaining eye widened in surprise. "Neither gods nor my kind venture near that cursed land. I believe there are no colonies whatsoever in that area."

"We heard that the land and water were contaminated in the ancient wars. Is that true?" I asked.

"Large areas do indeed appear barren, and it's possible that harmful substances still remain."

"Is it true that there are still toxic fumes and radioactivity that will kill you as soon as you step foot into the area?"

Kiroumaru grinned. "No, that's just a rumor. Any poison gas would have dissipated long ago, I expect. As for radioactive material, plutonium 239 has a half-life of 24,000 years, but I don't believe the area is polluted enough to endanger life."

"How do you know?"

"Because I have been there once before. Of course, I did not ingest any food or water from the area, but I walked around Tokyo for a day and breathed in its air and noticed no detrimental effects to my health."

Satoru and I looked at each other. Was this a sign from the heavens? Kiroumaru seemed to guess what we were thinking.

"I never forget the geography of an area once I have visited it. I beg you to allow me to lead the way."

"You can't trust anything this creature says! An exospecies is an exospecies. You don't know what it's planning behind its facade of loyalty," Jakujou warned hastily.

"You can doubt my loyalty. But believe this: my hatred for Yakomaru is very real. That brute imprisoned my queen, and I have no doubt she has been as ill-treated as I have. No matter what it takes, I'll rip Yakomaru limb from limb and rescue the queen. Right now, that is my only reason for living," Kiroumaru said, cold fire blazing in his green eyes. "Although I said earlier that I experienced no problems with my health, I must tell you that a third of the soldiers that accompanied me died or were injured. There are still dangers lurking in that dark land. Going there without a guide would be suicide, even for a god."

Although Jakujou continued to protest vehemently, we had stopped long since stopped listening. We had to go, and our minds were filled with nothing but that dangerous land called Tokyo.

The fake false minoshiro showed no signs of turning on even after over six hours in the sun.

"This is bad. We have no idea where to go if this thing doesn't work," Satoru sighed. "Even if we have the address, we still don't have a map from the right time period."

"Let's charge it again tomorrow. It's been in hibernation for over a hundred years after all. More importantly, we have to get going soon."

I touched the fake false minoshiro. It was warm from the sun, but showed no indication that it was going to work.

"Good. It's almost sunset, so the light reflecting off the river will conceal us better than darkness will."

Kiroumaru seemed in much better spirits after he had eaten and washed. Since he couldn't go around naked, he was given a monk's robe to wear. It made him look like a priest from some demonic temple.

"…how are we supposed to control this?" Inui asked when he saw the strange contraption floating in the temple's dock.

Once I saw the name Muou no Rigyo painted on the side, I realized it was a boat of some sort. It was about five meters long and roughly resembled two boats stacked bottom to bottom. There was a roof you could shut to prevent water from coming in. The four of us, three humans and one queerat, sat packed like sardines in a can.

"One person looks through the front window and gives directions, and another one or two people control the outer wheels," Jakujou explained.

The outer wheels were shaped like small water wheels, and the axels penetrated the hull so that we could control the wheels by turning the rudders on the inside. But to prevent water from seeping in, the rudders were covered by a half-sphere of glass, so the only way to control it was with cantus. To go forward you rotate the wheels forward, to go backward you rotate them backward, and to turn you rotate one wheel forward and one backward.

"This is owned by the temple and is the only submersible boat in the district. It was originally used to survey riverbeds, but it is also used as a last means of escape for the chief priest and other high priests in times of emergency. But given the nature of the situation, we're giving you special permission…"

"Jakujou, I deeply appreciate everything you've done for us," Satoru said politely. "I regret not being able to thank Head Priest Mushin and Chief Priest Gyousha in person. If you could pass along my thanks, I would appreciate it."

"Must you leave already? At the risk of sounding tedious, I beg you to reconsider. Going off with that exospecies is madness."

"We don't have a choice now. We must use every tool we can."

We lifted the pack with the fake false minoshiro, a change of clothes, and some other items into the submarine, and set out, full of uneasy feelings. I sat in front navigating; Satoru was at the right wheel and Inui at the left. We stayed above the water as we rowed through the canal leading from the temple. Jakujou opened the door disguised as a thicket of reeds. The door closed slowly behind us as we entered the Tone River. That was the last time I saw the Temple of Purity.

It was pitch black inside the submarine as we closed the roof and started to dive. The water was muddy and it was already getting dark outside, so at first I wasn't able to navigate properly. On top of that, the left and right wheels weren't turning in sync so the submarine zigzagged across the bottom of the river. Still, we managed to travel a good distance, hitting a couple boulders along with way, before the three of us finally got the hang of it.

Then we noticed the submarine's biggest flaw. The space inside was small and could only hold enough air for the four of us for short periods of time, so we had to resurface and open the roof for fresh air.

Diving had taken longer than expected because we had to continue moving forward while going down. Surfacing, this delay was almost unbearable. Kiroumaru stuck his head out and breathed deeply. After a while, he closed the roof again and reported his observations.

"It would be better to dive. The scent of my kind is strong up ahead."

The submarine sank slowly beneath the surface once again. We felt it touch bottom and start rolling sluggishly along the riverbed.

"How far do we have to stay under?" Satoru asked no one in particular.

Nobody answered.

After a short distance, I saw the shadow of a boat above us. Then two…three. They seemed to be queerat patrols. The entire lower portion of the Tone River was under enemy control.

The submarine crept beneath the patrols. We all froze, not even daring to breathe. We had no idea how far sound from inside the submarine could travel up through the water.

Finally, the patrol boats disappeared from view.

"Let's surface," Satoru said.

"But…shouldn't we wait a bit? There might be more of them nearby."

Satoru shook his head. "We might come across more enemies later. We need to get air every chance we get."

Inui and Kiroumaru agreed with him, so the majority vote was to go up to the surface.

We opened the roof and let fresh air flow in. All of us breathed deeply, relishing in that simple act.

"If we keep going up and down like this, we won't be able to tell when we've reached the ocean. Can't we just stay above the surface and push through their ranks at full speed? They won't be able to block us," I said, not wanting to go under again.

"Didn't we already talk about this? It's true they probably don't have the entire river under their control so we can make it out to the ocean, but that'll expose our movements and they might guess what we're up to. Since we have the chance to get out unnoticed, we should take it."

Satoru's explanation made perfect sense, so I couldn't complain.

Now that the sun had set, it was rapidly getting dark. Even being above-water, we had to pay close attention to where we were going. Just as I was wondering how I would see anything underwater, Kiroumaru spoke.

"Please shut the roof and dive. There's a considerable number of queerats ahead. It's probably another patrol."

The submarine slid silently underwater. It was unbelievably dark.

The depth of the Tone River around that area was around four or five meters. It wasn't deep enough to block out light from above, but the moon hadn't yet risen and the clouds obscured the stars. But the blackness underwater was so complete that I couldn't see my hands in front of my face.

"Sorry, I can't see anything anymore."

Inui and Satoru stopped turning the wheels, unsure of what to do.

"We can let the current carry us for now," Kiroumaru said helpfully. "Please just make sure we don't run into anything."

How could I tell if we were going to hit something if I couldn't see anything at all? I was annoyed at Kiroumaru, but resumed looking out the window anyway.

"I know, we just need a light source! If I make a small light in here, we'll be able to see outside."

"That won't work," Satoru said. "It's too obvious if there's something shining in the water."

"So we're just going to keep going blindly?"

"There's no other choice, is there?"

Just as I was about to reply, I saw a faint ray of light outside.

"Huh? Look. There's light."

"Sh! Quiet." Inui gripped my shoulders from behind.

We all sat unmoving. Eventually, the source of the light came into view.

"They've lit the river with torches," Satoru whispered.

"Are they looking for the submarine?"

"We're probably okay," he said without much confidence.

"Please don't worry. They're only paying attention to the surface of the water. The idea that a boat can travel underwater has never crossed their minds," Kiroumaru said with certainty.

With the light from the torches, we started slowly rolling forward again. As Kiroumaru said, they didn't seem to notice a thing. It probably helped that the light would have reflected off the water, making it all but impossible to see us.

In the faint light, I saw silhouettes of numerous rafts ahead of us on the surface.

"Satoru, look," I whispered.

Leaving Inui to propel the submarine, Satoru came forward and peered through the window.

"What?"

When he saw the rafts above us, he let out a long sigh. "I see. I didn't expect them to have patrols all the way out here…"

"What do you mean?"

"They've put obstacles on the river to stop boats from going through. There are probably archers on the rafts waiting to attack."

This was a narrow part of the river, but it was still a couple hundred meters wide. It undoubtedly took a huge amount of effort to build enough rafts to create a blockade this large.

"It is the work of a paranoid coward. But even the cleverest schemer could not predict that we'd escape underwater," Kiroumaru said, sounding satisfied.

The river was just deep enough for us to creep by under the rafts.

Once we slipped through the blockade, everything went dark again. We surfaced quietly and opened the roof to let in some fresh air.

"They should have put snorkels in here or something," Satoru grumbled.

"We're only a short way from the mouth of the river now," Inui said encouragingly.

"So there's no need to dive anymore?"

"Kiroumaru, do you smell any quee…of your kind?"

"I don't know. The wind changes direction ahead and blows off the land." Kiroumaru sniffed vigorously and pricked his ears. "I can't hear anything either, but we should still be as quiet as possible."

The submarine drifted silently down the middle of the river. I stuck my head out over the roof and squinted ahead. The river was a lot wider here and I could barely see the banks on either side.

I was sure we were safe. My nerves began to settle. If we just kept going, we'd arrive at the mouth of the river. Once we made it to the Pacific Ocean, we wouldn't have to worry about being captured. Just a little farther.

At that moment, I spotted two or three boats about a kilometer ahead.

"Boats. What do we do?"

"Wait."

We stopped, rotating the wheels in the other direction to stay in place.

"…let's dive. We'll go all the way out to the ocean before surfacing."

"Hurry and run!" Kiroumaru suddenly shouted.

"Eh? What?"

"It's my kind and…it! I'm positive. The fiend's scent!"

"But you said the wind changed…"

Then I realized that the fiend was coming from behind.

I turned and saw the silhouette of a large sail. It was coming fast. The distance between us was no more than four or five hundred meters.

It knew we were here. The fiend had much better eyesight that the queerats. The river was dark, but there was enough starlight to reflect off the ripples we were making.

"Should we dive?"

"There's not enough time… Let's make a break for it!" Satoru shouted.

I pushed the submarine full speed ahead. Satoru stuck his head out the roof and threw up a smoke screen. From what I heard afterward, he whipped up the air on the surface of the water and created a wall of bubbles to try to hide our movements.

"Saki, close your eyes!"

I had no idea what he was planning, but squeezed my eyes shut even as I continued pushing the submarine faster. I saw a blinding light through my eyelids. It seemed like the patrol boats in front of us were bursting into flames. The fiend's night vision would be temporarily lost once he was exposed to the light.

Eyes still shut, we sped through the burning boats.

Even after I opened my eyes, I continued accelerating on autopilot. The submarine flew forward with terrifying speed.

Before I knew it, we had already made it to the Pacific Ocean. We were out far enough that I could barely see the land anymore. The lapping waves of the river were nothing compared the ocean's fearsome swells. This was the stormy Kashimanada Sea.

"Where's the fiend…? Did we shake it off?"

"Yeah, for now. But I think it'll figure out what we're up to and catch up again."

"Why?"

"If all we wanted to do was escape, we would have gone on land since they had control of the river. But instead, we took the much more dangerous option of forcing our way through. Once Yakomaru finds out about this, he might guess our plan. Or at the very least, he'll think it's something worth investigating."

The rocking motion of the submarine was making me nauseated. The pungent smell of the sea wasn't helping either.

"So there's no time to lose…"

"Right. As long as we keep the land to our right, it should be easy going. We just need to go past Cape Inubo and around the Boso Peninsula." Satoru gazed out over the dark sea. "The tricky part comes after. If we can't get the fake false minoshiro to work, it's all over."

The tidal flats of Tokyo Bay illuminated by starlight were a beautiful sight. It seemed nothing like the horrifying place Kiroumaru had described.

We stopped the submarine at the far end of the bay to wait for dawn, as Kiroumaru warned that it was dangerous to try to land in the darkness. Last time, he had arrived in Tokyo at midday and noticed nothing out of the ordinary, but his soldiers that accidentally wandered too close to the shore at night had all been eaten by some unknown creature.

The waves here were much gentler than those on the open sea, but I was still itching to stand on solid ground again. So when the sky finally started to glow with the first light of dawn, I was relieved that we could finally get going.

A giant shadow appeared over our heads. I looked up in surprise and saw a giant flock of something flying in the dawn light.

"Bats. The place is overrun with them. You could call them the true rulers of Tokyo now," Kiroumaru explained.

I wondered how the bats had bred so copiously. Though seeing Kiroumaru's calm expression, they didn't seem to be too dangerous.

We spotted the northwestern shore of Tokyo Bay. It was covered in grey sand as far as I could see. There were no plants or animals in sight.

I jumped off the submarine the moment we touched land, and stretched my cramped muscles. The crunch of sand underfoot felt great, though I still felt like the ground was swaying slightly. The others followed me ashore.

We searched for a place to hide the submarine and found a grey reef-like thing on the far end of a sand dune. On closer inspection it appeared to be the remnants of an ancient concrete building. It was like the round buildings I had seen in the Robber Fly colony, but much larger. On the other side of the building was a giant crack in the wall. Peeking through it, I saw a ledge about twenty meters below. The hole seemed to extend all the way down into the earth. Cold, musty air drifted out of it. We secured the submarine on the ledge and took out the things we needed.

"So, now what?"

"There's no point wandering around blindly; we have to try charging it again," Satoru said, pointing at the knapsack holding the fake false minoshiro.

"We should move to a safe place first. Somewhere with a view of the ocean so we can spot the enemy if they manage to make it here," Inui said.

We moved to a higher location that looked like a blackened rocky mountain, but was actually the ruins of another ancient building. Even the sand dunes appeared to be concrete that had broken down until it was nearly unrecognizable.

The fake false minoshiro was placed in a spot where it could soak up the rays from the rising sun. Then there was nothing to do but wait. We ate breakfast, silently chewing on the military rations supplied by the temple. We didn't light a fire to cook, in case the smoke gave away our position. The rations were ball-shaped chunks consisting of buckwheat, dried fish, dried plum, walnuts, Chinese wolfberries and other foods held together with molasses. It reminded me of the queerat rations I had eaten a long time ago when we had gone to find the Goat Moth colony with Yakomaru. The taste was different, but not by much. I managed to force myself to eat it.

After eating I started feeling drowsy and wondered how it was even possible to be sleepy in this situation. Inui suggested that we should sleep in shifts and I passed out almost instantly.

I don't remember what I dreamt about, but it seems like people don't have nightmares when they're in a life-threatening situation. Instead, I woke with the feeling that I had just had a rather enjoyable dream. It was probably about my childhood.

There was a strange creature in my dream that croaked like a frog and chirped like a bird at the same time.

Just as I was thinking that it was annoyingly noisy, I woke up. What in the world was that sound?

When I opened my eyes, the others were gathered around the fake false minoshiro.

"What's going on?"

"It started up…it's fully charged."

I was fully awake now. I jumped up and made my way into their circle.

The fake false minoshiro was still making that terrible racket, but it finally spoke.

"I am the Tsukuba branch of the National Assembly Library, mirror terminal 008," it said in a soft female voice.

We all started cheering.

"I have a question," Satoru said.

"Starting synchronization…synchronization in progress…synchronization in progress," it said, ignoring Satoru.

Somehow, it seemed to be communicating with other library terminals.

"Synchronization complete," it announced after a while. "Calendar recalculation complete, archive update complete."

It didn't seem to have any problems transferring information to other machines over long distances.

"Good for you. I have a question," Satoru cut in.

"User registration is required to access query services."

Satoru glanced at me. These were the exact words the false minoshiro had said to us during summer camp.

"How do I register?"

"You must be eighteen year or older, and supply proof of name, address, and age with one of the following: driver's license, insurance card (with address), passport (a copy with full date of birth, and current address), student identification (with address and date of birth), certificate of residence (issued within the past three months), or other official identification. All must be within the expiry date."

"I don't have any of those."

"Furthermore, the following forms of identification are not valid: employee identification, student identification (lacking date of birth or address), commuter passes, business cards…"

"If you don't answer my question right now, I'll break you. And I'm only going to warn you once–you'd better not try to hypnotize me."

"…documentation requirements have been waived. Beginning user registration process."

"Skip that too. Tell me how to get to this address."

Satoru read the address and the fake false minoshiro started beeping loudly again.

"Unable to start global positioning system…unable to receive satellite GPS signals…unable to receive satellite GPS signals…out of signal range."

"That's unfortunate. Those things no longer exist."

"Receiving signals from other terminals to triangulate your current position."

The fake false minoshiro was silent for a moment that felt like an eternity.

"…comparison with map data complete. Geomagnetic positioning by electric compass complete. Target location has been identified. Please proceed 29 degrees northwest from your current position."

I pumped my fist in victory as we started off toward the address in the letter. Though whether the psychobuster was still there or not, only the gods knew.

"Hey, tell me about the psychobuster."

The fake false minoshiro thought for a moment.

"…search returned 57 hits."

"It's supposedly a weapon, also called psychokiller or psychocide."

"One hit. …'Psychobuster' is the name of a bacteriological weapon developed in America during the final years of the ancient civilization in an effort to eradicate all psychics."

I was surprised to hear that it was a bacterium.

"But the word psycho means mind…is it talking about mentally abnormal people?"

Satoru was rehashing the same old topic again.

"It's the same word, but you may be thinking of the slang that refers to mentally unstable people, like the Hitchcock movie 'Psycho'. In this case it refers to those with what is broadly known as psychokinesis, called 'psyko'."

"What do you mean by bacteriological weapon?"

"Psychobuster's formal name is 'strong toxicity bacillus anthracis', abbreviated 'STBA'. Bacillus anthracis occurs naturally in soil from decaying grass. Once absorbed into the body, it can cause cutaneous, pulmonary, and gastrointestinal anthrax, all serious illnesses…"

Its explanation sent shivers up my spine. When exposed to adverse environmental conditions, bacillus anthracis forms dormant endospores. Because of this, it is a good candidate as a biological weapon. Cultivated bacillus anthracis spores can be turned into a white powder that retains its potency even in heat or dryness. So you could, for example, infect someone by sending it through the mail.

STBA is a genetic manipulation of bacillus anthracis that raises the mortality rate of pulmonary anthrax from 80 or 90% to almost 100%. STBA has multi-drug-resistance, making the usual antibiotics like penicillin or tetracycline ineffective.

"…additionally, while normal pulmonary anthrax is rarely contagious between humans, STBA is highly contagious. As such, containing outbreaks through conventional epidemiological means is exceedingly difficult. In addition to having the destructive power to make it an ideal first-strike weapon, the strain's toxicity was designed to fall in one or two years to facilitate post-war cleanup, so it can be used without reserve and does not harm the environment…"

This was insane. I couldn't understand what the people back then were thinking.

"…are we really going to get this thing?" I asked.

The three of them looked at me uncomprehendingly.

"There's no choice if we're going to defeat the fiend," Satoru said.

"Its toxicity will decrease with time, so it will not cause problems in the future," Inui added.

"Wonderful. All we need is to infect the fiend while he's distracted. The only question is how to get him to inhale the powder," Kiroumaru said.

"…although regular bacillus anthracis has a lifetime of about fifty years, STBA spores is believed to last for a millennium…" the fake false minoshiro continued to drone on.

"That's enough."

Satoru silenced it, probably worrying that the battery would run out.

Suddenly, Kiroumaru leapt to his feet.

"Damn…"

"What?" Inui asked.

"That bird. Please capture it," he pointed at a shadow that was retreating steadily into the distance.

Just as Inui was preparing to capture it, Satoru called out.

"No, wait."

A vacuum lens appeared in front of him. Unlike normal lenses, it was concave, magnifying whatever it was pointed at. We gathered around him.

The tip of a sail was clearly visible on the horizon.

"I can't believe it. They've already caught up." Satoru sounded shocked.

"I was careless. Scouts often use birds to help their search, but I did not expect that we would be discovered so quickly. They must have found us in the bay last night using owls or nightjars," Kiroumaru said regretfully. "They probably already know of our present position. We should escape, but everything within a thirty-kilometer radius is a barren desert. There is no place to hide. They'll be able to come after us in a straight line, and it'll only be a matter of time before they catch up."

"So should we go underground?" Inui asked, a deep furrow between his brows.

"Underground Tokyo is hell. The most soldiers I lost were when we were exploring underground. But there's no point talking about that now."

Kiroumaru led us forty or fifty meters away to the crack from which air was blowing.

"When we came by earlier, I smelled the air coming from the hole and it seems like it connects to the underground tunnels in Tokyo. It's not too steep, so we can probably walk down."

It looked like we had no other choice.

"That's great. In any case, we just have to find the psychobuster before they catch up with us. And when they do catch up, it saves us the trouble of having to go find them. Let us go into hell. …worse comes to worst, we can use the psychobuster to infect the fiend right here in the tunnels before he kills us."

Inui's words echoed our resolve.

VI

Beacon in the Dark

1

Carefully, one step at a time, we descended into the earth. I felt that I would slip on the limestone if I wasn't careful.

I assumed that it would be cooler inside the cave, but as we went deeper I started sweating. Not only was it hotter, the humidity was close to a hundred percent.

"Why is it so hot?" I asked.

"Because of the bats," Kiroumaru answered shortly before hurrying on.

There was a complex network of wind blowing through the caves that Kiroumaru sniffed at carefully before choosing a path. Satoru carried the fake false minoshiro in his backpack, with only its head sticking out point us in the general direction and tell us how far away we were. It didn't have any information on what path to take, so we had to rely on Kiroumaru.

Slowly, the path leveled out. Although we were far from the entrance, small cracks here and there let in enough light to see by.

"It will get even hotter from here. Please bear with it."

I could hear a muted commotion up ahead. At the same time, a wave of heat and a stench that reminded me of a pigsty washed over me. Kiroumaru pointed up at a hole about meter wide where all the noise seemed to be coming from.

He scurried up the steep wall. The rocks were already slippery to begin with, but the moisture made them even more difficult to climb. Even going up four or five meters was no small feat.

Kiroumaru stopped outside the hole and peered inside.

"It's completely dark inside. It would be easier if we had a light," he said, turning back toward us."

I retrieved a lamp from my knapsack. It wasn't very bright, but could burn any sort of plant based oil for up to fifteen hours. Another convenient point was that it did not require cantus except when lighting it.

A high-pitched racket reached my ears. It was like the sound of bells or the cackling of a horde of goblins. Looking through the hole, I saw a space many times larger than the one we were in. But as I continued following Kiroumaru, the heat and smell became even more unbearable.

"Watch your feet," Kiroumaru warned, his one eye glinting unpleasantly in the lamplight.

I pointed the lamp down and screamed. The entire floor was wriggling. Upon closer inspection, I saw that it was crawling with insects. There were maggots, parasitic worms, millipedes, cockroaches, and spiders larger than any I'd ever seen before. All were moving through some sort of mud that covered every surface. From the stink rising from it, I realized that it was a thick buildup of guano. The heat too came from the fermentation of feces.

"I can't walk through that!" I wailed.

Kiroumaru and Inui continued forward unflinchingly.

"We have to, Saki." Satoru took my hand.

But the physical repulsion was too strong. I couldn't take a single step.

"What if there are poisonous bugs? What if they accidentally bite us…?"

I turned the lamp upward to see if there were insects on the ceiling as well.

The ceiling was over ten meters high, and packed full of roosting bats. The high-pitched sound was coming from them. I felt the blood drain from my face.

"No way. I can't. If the bats swoop down on us, we're done for."

"Do the bats here pose a threat to humans?" Satoru asked the fake false minoshiro.

"The bats in these tunnels are all believed to be Tokyo giant bats. They hunt for insects in the forest around Kanto during the day and return to the caves at night. They have few natural predators and have never been recorded to be a threat to humans. Also, it is unknown if they have any communicable diseases."

"See? It's fine," Satoru said.

"…the caves of area 23 of Old Tokyo are believed to be home to ten billion bats. The guano of Tokyo giant bats is food to many animals, and have transformed a formerly barren environment into a thriving ecosystem. Tokyo giant bats are named on account of their large size, but it is doubtful that they are descendants of Ogasawara giant bats. This is based on the premise that the megabat suborder, which includes the Ogasawara giant bats, do not live in caves and do not use echolocation. The other theory is that Kikugashira bats, of which there are many in the Kanto area, have evolved larger bodies…"

The fake false minoshiro continued to drone on and on. It seemed that unless it was asked a new question or explicitly ordered to stop talking, it would just keep going on endlessly.

"…are the insects that live off of guano venomous?" Satoru asked.

"The majority of insects here are non-venomous, and also do not bite humans. The exception is the cave botfly. Due to the unending supply of guano, cave botflies have no need to search for food and therefore have lost the ability to fly. They spend their lives as maggots and lay eggs in the soil. However, they still have sharp mouths and can bite people on the hands or feet. It is unconfirmed if they are venomous, but the wounds they inflict can become infected in unclean environments. In addition, the secretions from their mouths can, on rare occasions, cause allergic reactions…"

"Alright, alright. That's enough," he silenced the fake false minoshiro. "It's these big maggots, right? Well, we just have to watch out for them. In any case, we have to go now. There's not much time."

I squeezed my eyes shut and stepped onto the disgusting, wriggling mass of insects and guano. My boots squelched and I sank in up to my ankle. I shuddered violently and goosebumps sprouted all

over my body. This more or less managed to distract me from the insects flying so thickly around us that I felt like I was in a sauna.

After a while, I felt solid rock underneath my feet again and was so relieved I thought my knees would give way.

"Now I know what you mean when you said that underground Tokyo was hell."

Kiroumaru smiled. "We're still in heaven right now."

It was slightly cooler once we left the bat cave. I was thankful for this at first, but soon started feeling clammy. This was the first time I realized how uncomfortable it was to be cold and damp at the same time.

Kiroumaru, who was still leading the way, didn't seem to be bothered by this environment at all. I remembered that queerats were originally cave-dwelling creatures and felt encouraged by his presence. But then I remembered that the ones chasing us were also queerats.

"You said you've been to Tokyo before?"

"Yes." Kiroumaru replied, sounding somewhat reluctant to discuss this.

"So you know this area well? Why didn't anyone build colonies here? The caves would have been empty in the beginning."

"My species sent many to tackle this land, but none attempted to live here," he answered solemnly. "There were too many unpleasant occupants already here. Like I said before, I lost a third of my soldiers just exploring the area."

I wondered if I should press him about it, or ask the fake false minoshiro about the unpleasant occupants.

"Where to from here?" Satoru asked before I could say anything.

"27 degrees northwest. Your route has been largely correct so far."

"Hmm…" Satoru didn't seem too happy for some reason. "I assume you don't know whether or not the building we're heading for still exists?"

"There is no information about it in the archives, so I cannot say for certain. However, the chances that at least part of the building remains is estimated to be over fifty percent."

"Really? Why do you say that? It's over a thousand years old by now," Satoru said excitedly.

I finally figured out what he was worrying about.

"We are currently headed toward Central Government Building No. 8, which is built from ultra long-lasting concrete. The concrete is a glycol ether and amino alcohol derivative admixture bonded with a polymer surfactant. The surface is vitrified…"

"You don't need to go into detail. What you're saying is that it's not unusual for the material to survive a thousand years?"

"Theoretically, that is correct," the fake false minoshiro replied.

"So why haven't most other buildings survived?"

"The normal concrete used by the ancient civilization only lasts fifty years on average, and a hundred years at most. Shoddy construction, concrete mixtures with too much water, and mixtures containing sea sand causing alkali-silica reactions all shorten the lifespan of concrete. A third of the buildings in Tokyo were destroyed in the Nine-Day War, and most of the ones that remained fell apart within a hundred years. Weathered by acid rain, the limestone dissolved and flowed into large

underground spaces, creating limestone caves in mere centuries that would have taken tens of thousands under normal circumstances."

"What's the Nine-Day War?" I asked.

"After normal people stopped hunting PK users, the PK users launched a counterattack. A group of less than a hundred PK users rounded up eleven million people, and over the course of nine days…"

"That's enough," I said.

I couldn't bear to listen to what it was going to say.

Although it was never taught in school, I was well aware that human history was full of war and slaughter. But I didn't want to believe that past cantus users, people no different from us, could kill those who were powerless.

Still, the psychobuster hadn't been able to change the tide of war. I thought it was ironic that we, the victors of the previous war, now had to rely on the very device that had been designed to kill us.

Speaking of irony, Tokyo was another prime example. It's concrete-clad facade had been created to block out nature, yet after the concrete had been broken down, it transformed into karst formations that had been around since the beginning of time. While Tokyo was a barren wasteland on the surface, it was a humid dungeon filled with nasty creatures below.

Kiroumaru suddenly stopped. He raised his snout and sniffed carefully. Soon, he located a thin crack in the wall and stuck his nose into it.

"What's wrong?" Inui asked.

"Our pursuers. Their odor is coming this way. …fufu. I see how it is."

"Hey, we need to get out of here fast…!" Satoru shouted.

"It's alright. The enemy is still far away. Moreover, they're in a different tunnel. Only their smell is being carried through on the wind, but it's enough for me to roughly discern their formation."

"Formation? You mean like how many there are?"

I was amazed by Kiroumaru's skill.

"Yes. There are…seven in all. Fewer than I expected, but perhaps that makes them more mobile down here. Five of them I have never smelled before. They're most likely rank and file. The other two I know well. One is the fiend. The other is Yakomaru."

"Yakomaru?" Satoru yelped in surprise. "The general is coming after us himself? He's been hiding until now."

"There's nothing surprising about it," Kiroumaru smirked. "They need the fiend in order to stand a battle against you three. Furthermore, the fiend is their trump card–losing him would spell defeat. Taking personal command is the only logical decision if he is to ensure success."

He spoke as if he would have done the same in this situation.

"Wait a minute. Do you think they know our number as well?" Inui asked sharply.

"It's possible," Kiroumaru said matter-of-factly. "There are dozens upon dozens of tunnels of all sizes under Tokyo and various air currents running through them. Even the air here is being carried away by the wind. Anyone who smells it will know how many are in our group.

Since we knew each others' whereabouts, it might seem like we were evenly matched. But with greater numbers and the fiend as a trump card, they had an overwhelming advantage.

That's what I thought at the time.

We continued quietly through the cave.

Since all the navigating was left to Kiroumaru and the fake false minoshiro, I had a lot of time to think.

Since the day before yesterday, the night of the Summer Festival, we had been plagued by one horrifying event after another. Because of that, I hadn't had time to calm down and think about one crucial question.

"Hey, Satoru. Why did Maria's kid turn into a fiend?"

He didn't answer for a moment.

"…I don't know. I haven't the faintest idea how he was brought up. They use drugs, don't they?" Satoru glanced quickly at Kiroumaru.

"But can that turn an ordinary kid into a fiend so easily?"

"In all the fiends that have been documented, they say the change occurs suddenly. Even if the parents are normal, the child can still be born with the makings of a fiend."

"But does that really happen? Isn't the probability incredibly small?"

Satoru shook his head. "There's no point thinking about that now. In any case, we have to stop the fiend, or else our district will be destroyed. For that, we need the psychobuster."

"Yeah, but…" I tried to put the hazy thoughts in my mind into words. "I can't help but feel that he isn't a fiend."

"What are you talking about? You saw what he did. How many people do you think he killed all by himself? He even killed Shisei!" he raised his voice angrily.

Perhaps disturbed by his voice, something on the ceiling fell and plopped right onto Satoru.

"Uwa!"

Satoru's surprised and pained yell echoed throughout the cave. He fell back onto the ground.

"Remove it quickly!" Kiroumaru said urgently, turning around.

I cast the lantern light over Satoru. There was a slimy creature thirty centimeters long stuck to his left shoulder.

"Don't try to pull it off. Set fire to it and it will leave on its own."

I began heating up the creature's body. It would have been faster to set it completely on fire, but then Satoru would be left with a severe burn.

Nothing happened for two or three seconds. Then the slimy thing started to bubble and smoke. It stretched out its body, and four antennae appeared at one end.

"It's a slug…"

I couldn't believe it. Did slugs actually attack people? I burned off the four antennae. The monster slug writhed in pain, stretching its body to sixty, seventy centimeters, then fell to the ground. I immediately incinerated it in a flash of blue flame. The slug let out a squealing sound and disappeared in a puff of smoke and steam.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Please be careful! There are more above." Kiroumaru pointed at the dark ceiling.

Inui lifted the lantern. There were tons of them hanging off the rock. It seemed like they had been about to follow the first slug and drop down on us, but the fire was making them sway back and forth in fear.

Inui tore them off the ceiling and flung them on the ground in a pile. There were probably over a hundred in all, squirming and waving their feelers in the air. Slime and bubbles spurted from them as they burned, and a chorus of screams rose in the air along with a foul smell.

I looked over at Satoru. His shirt near the shoulder was very slightly torn and turning red. Underneath, a large area of his skin was seeping blood.

"Does it hurt?"

Satoru nodded, teeth gritted.

"What the hell was that?" I snapped at the fake false minoshiro.

It stretched out a feeler, trying to see what I was talking about. Its movements were oddly similar to the slugs'.

"They are bloodsucker slugs. They cling to the cave ceiling and drop down on unsuspecting prey, latching on with barbed teeth and inflicting extensive skin damage before sucking their prey's blood. If the prey is attacked by a large number of slugs, it will die from blood loss."

"Aren't slugs normally herbivores?" I asked as I disinfected Satoru's wound with the first-aid kit in my knapsack.

"The usual slugs are of a different species, though the testacella genus from Europe are carnivorous and prey on worms. However, bloodsucker slugs are the only terrestrial gastropod mollusks that are known to suck blood."

"Is it venomous?"

"It is most likely not venomous."

I was slightly relieved to hear that.

"The wound may not appear grave, but the bleeding will become worse if left untreated. You should apply pressure to stop the bleeding," Kiroumaru said, examining the wound.

"I had no idea such a nasty creature existed…it really is hell down here," I muttered.

Kiroumaru shook his head. "This is just the beginning."

We continued on, Satoru bearing his wound uncomplainingly. Due to the burn, we were unable to stop the bleeding. Even though the wound itself was shallow, I was still worried about there being venom. Not that I could have done anything about it, since I didn't bring any antivenom. Later, I learned that the slugs' suckers were so powerful that they could damage blood vessels deep inside the skin.

I had painkillers in the first-aid kit, but Satoru refused them because they might impair his ability to use cantus.

"This isn't normal. None of this is…it shouldn't be possible to live here for any length of time," Satoru whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you think it's strange? That the slug evolved like that?"

"But…it's sort of similar to what happens outside the Holy Barrier. The cantus that escapes through the filter of our consciousness is constantly leaking out and directed through the barrier…"

Even as I spoke I wondered where I had heard such a thing.

"Leaking cantus… That's an interesting idea. But it's true that all the new animals that have been discovered in the past millennium have been near the Holy Barrier." He suddenly looked surprised. "It could be the cause of what's happened here. People who live in Japan imagine Tokyo as a kind of hell. The cantus that leaked out when someone thought about Tokyo could have slowly changed it to become more and more hellish…"

A chill ran up my spine. Here we were, right in the pits of hell.

"Despite what the fake false minoshiro said, acid rain probably wasn't the only element involved in the formation of these stalactite caves."

A different thought suddenly surfaced in my mind.

Cantus leakage… No. That wasn't my own thought.

It was as if there was some other person inside me.

Someone I know extremely well.

As we continued through the tunnel, Kiroumaru stopped abruptly and put his ear to the ground.

"What's wrong?" Inui asked, startled.

Did he hear our pursuers' footsteps?

"The rock here is thin. Underneath it is a deep pit. It's a good place for a trap.

"Got it," Inui said, catching on immediately.

He created large cracks in the ground spanning the width of the tunnel. It would hold the weight of one queerat, but would collapse if any more tried to pass.

"It probably won't kill them, but they'll start looking out for more traps and will slow their pursuit," Kiroumaru said, sounding satisfied."

"What if we have to come back this way?"

"If I fall for my own trap, then I don't deserve to live."

I started to wonder if I deserved to live.

The swarms of flies increased as we continued forward. They buzzed maddeningly around our heads, slipping in through any gap they could find. Sweat dripped down my face as the temperature started to rise again.

"I believe there is another bat colony ahead," Kiroumaru said. "Our scent should be concealed for a short time after we pass through it…"

My heart sank at the thought of having to walk through that stinking cesspool again. The only good thing was that the way out was right after.

In the darkness ahead I saw dozens of faint ribbons of green light.

"What's that?"

Kiroumaru growled with disdain. The sound reminded me of a tainted cat's cry.

"They stick to you and prevent you from moving. But as long as you take care not to touch them, they are not dangerous. More importantly, their presence means that there is a shaft that leads to a higher level. If we take that route, we might be able to throw off our pursuers."

We consulted the fake false minoshiro then took Kiroumaru's suggestion.

There were dozens of large connected caves under Tokyo with even more smaller tunnels running alongside them. The caves were relatively close to the surface, with numerous levels built beneath them. These levels were accessible through natural faults in the rock, or more rarely, shafts.

In between the layers are numerous thin tunnels made by driller earthworms. Like normal earthworms, they have no teeth, but are able to move easily through concrete and rock by secreting a strong acid through their head and drilling their way through.

The holes made by the driller earthworms let in light, water and air, benefiting many creatures who live underground, including the flytrapper.

Flytrappers have existed since the ancient times and are a direct descendent of giant hammerhead flatworms of the planarian family. Giant hammerhead flatworms can grow up to a meter long and resemble a thin piece of tape with a mouth in the middle. They hunt worms and slugs and, like spiders, are able to produce silk.

Flytrappers spin silk to descend through the tunnels created by driller earthworms. Like glowworms, they give off a faint green light to attract flying insects, which get stuck to the sticky mucus on their bodies, and are then devoured by the thirty centimeter-long mouth in the center of their bodies. Flytrappers can grow up to twelve meters in length, and are said to be able to suffocate Tokyo giant bats by wrapping around them like a snake.

Sensing the heat from the lamp, the flytrappers slithered up, leaving the shaft in the ceiling clear.

Kiroumaru estimated that the rock layer between this level and the one above was about forty centimeters thick as driller earthworms have a tendency to drill where the rock is thinnest. Inui and I climbed up carefully. The flytrappers had already retreated to the next higher level and were nowhere in sight.

We came back down and hurried ahead to the bat colony in order to leave our scent. Then we came back and climbed up through the shaft.

After that, it was time for my specialty to come into play. I fashioned a plug from the rocks and filled in the shaft, then used the image for fixing broken pottery to meld the stone together and form a neat seal. I couldn't see how it looked from the bottom, but I was confident that the plug wouldn't be noticed unless it was closely examined. Although my skill looks plain, putting something together is fairly sophisticated–something a fiend who only knows about destruction wouldn't be able to comprehend.

According to Kiroumaru, smells carry well in the flat tunnels, but do not spread as well through the shafts, so our scent should be hidden for the time being.

I thought it was a brilliant idea to switch levels. But we needed to think carefully before doing so. We might not be so lucky every time.

Compared to the level below, it was drier and cooler here, and there was much more fauna.

One reason for that was, unlike the rocky lower level, there was plenty of soil here. Because of that, worms of all sizes lived here. The other was that the only other mammal in the Tokyo underground lived in these levels. The fake false minoshiro called them cave mice, descended from brown mice that had adapted to the current environment. Now, their eyes had become useless and they relied entirely on their noses to hunt for cave botflies and other insects that gather near guano.

These two animals formed the bottom of the food chain, so naturally there were other animals that preyed on them.

We soon came across these predators.

The first gave me a shock when the lantern light fell upon it. A giant leech. It was orange with black stripes, over four meters in length, and immensely fat around the middle. Its tiny head swiveled menacingly this way and that as it peered at its surroundings, and I couldn't help but think of it more as a snake than a leech. It scared me so much I unconsciously began chanting my mantra.

"There is no need to kill them. Move around a little and you'll see. They are able to tell how big we are by our movement and body heat."

I wondered when Kiroumaru became such an animal rights activist, but did as he said. The giant leech sensed that I was too big for it to attack, turned swiftly, and disappeared into the darkness. The fake false minoshiro explained that they were tiger leeches, and used to live in the mountains. They were said to be descended from octanaria leeches. Although they are part of the ringed worm species, they have evolved intelligence closer to reptiles in order to hunt.

Immediately after that, we came across a different species of leech hunting for food.

There was a seventy or eighty centimeter Yamate worm with glowing spots along its body crawling on the wall. The fake false minoshiro said that it was named for its resemblance to a train from the ancient civilization.

Suddenly, something came flying down from the ceiling with the speed of an arrow and pinned the worm to the wall. It was a crown leech. A descendant of the toothed leech, which has three teeth, the crown leech has a "crown" of sixteen teeth on its head it uses to hunt driller worms and other insects. It was much thinner compared to the tiger leech, but seeing the way it swallowed the struggling worm in one bite made me realize how ruthless life could be as it fought for survival.

"We should be about a third of the way there," Kiroumaru said.

I was disappointed there was still such a long way to go. From the barren, grassless area up ahead came the beautiful sound of insects chirping. I wondered what they were.

"What is that insect? Bell crickets?" I asked the fake false minoshiro.

"The chirping insects are related to the cockroach. Hexacentrich cockroach, oecanthus cockroach, kanetataki cockroach, and more, chirp to attract females…"

"Alright," I said, wincing.

"Saki, don't ask it any questions if you don't have to. What if it runs out of batteries before we get there?" Satoru said sullenly.

"Sorry."

He was unusually snappish. I wondered if it was because of his wound.

We walked single-file: Kiroumaru, Inui, Satoru, and me. I felt uneasy bringing up the rear, but I didn't have any confidence in going first either. Plus, Satoru was in no shape to be the rear guard, so I was stuck.

Suddenly, I sensed something behind me and turned around.

There was nothing there. Just the dark tunnel I had just walked through.

I faced forward again, but the uneasy tightness in my chest did not disappear.

I took a few steps and spun around again. Again, the lantern revealed nothing. Just my shadow stretching over the tunnel walls.

"What's wrong?" Satoru asked, perhaps feeling guilty for the way he had snapped at me earlier.

"Nothing. I keep feeling there's something…it's probably my imagination."

We walked without speaking. I kept straining my ears for some sound behind me, but there was only silence.

Then I realized the silence was abnormal.

The sound of cockroaches chirping could be heard coming from ahead as well as either side of us. But not from behind.

The cockroaches did not seem to be disturbed by us as we walked through them, so why did they stop chirping after we passed by?

I wanted to ask the fake false minoshiro, but hesitated. After we had walked for a bit, I turned slowly around once more.

Still nothing but shadows. Yet…

I was standing still, but my shadow was slowly coming closer.

"The shadow is moving…!" I yelled.

Kiroumaru ran hastily back from the front of the line.

"Fire! Drive it away with fire!"

I could make a spark with cantus, but couldn't make fire without something to burn. Opening the top of the lantern, I squirted out the oil and quickly raised its temperature to its flash point.

The tongue of flame licked the tunnel walls. But the shadow dispersed before the fire could reach it.

"What is that?"

"Run!"

We turned and ran for our lives. Apart from the uneven ground lit intermittently by the swinging lantern, I couldn't see a thing. It was insanity running like this.

After two or three minutes, just when I thought my lungs would burst, Kiroumaru came to a stop on all fours.

"I think we've put a considerable distance between us. The 'shadow' can't move quickly."

"What the hell is it?" Satoru interrupted.

"I don't know. But during my previous expedition here, that 'shadow' claimed the most lives. None escaped its hold."

"Tell me what that 'shadow' is," Satoru barked at the fake false minoshiro.

"Black widow mites. A carnivorous species of mites that hunts in shadow-like swarms. They possess a lethal neurotoxin and prey upon most lifeforms in the caves, devouring the soft tissue of their victims."

"…anyway, we have to keep moving," Inui said.

We continued at a fast pace. We could have tried burning them, but the mites were too small and quick to target. If we tried burning the entire tunnel, we'd end up destroying it. We couldn't blow them out with wind either, as the tunnel had too many nooks and crannies that the mites could hide

in. The absolute last resort would be to collapse the tunnel completely, but that might cause more destruction than we want. In any case, getting out of here was the best bet for now.

But before we had gone far, we discovered something strange on the ground.

"What's that?"

Inui shone the light on it. It illuminated what looked like a flat bag a couple meters long. It was orange with black spots.

It was the skin of the tiger leech from before. We all stood speechless.

"…must have been eaten by the 'shadow'. Nothing but skin and bones remained of my soldiers as well," Kiroumaru said calmly.

"Hey. The swarm that ate the leech is somewhere around here, isn't it?" Inui asked nervously.

"Probably. They might still be lurking on the walls or ceiling."

I looked around nervously.

"Do not worry. After devouring such a large animal, they should be sated. Let's go. We should make as little noise as possible to avoid provoking them."

We crept away quietly.

"This level appears to house the mites' nest. It's unexpected, but it's actually a good thing."

"A good thing?" Satoru snapped at Kiroumaru's optimism. "All of our lives are in danger. The tunnels are dark, and the mites are too small for us to use cantus against…"

"You're correct. But don't forget that the bigger threat, the fiend, will be coming though here too."

Satoru looked surprised.

"If they happen to come to this level, the 'shadow' will capture them. That'll stop them for a bit, and they might even be injured. …for that matter, we probably should have let the leeches live too. From now on, I suggest we do not kill any of the nasty creatures we come across."

"That might not be a good idea," Inui warned.

He had switched places with me and was now bringing up the rear.

"It seems like the 'shadow' is catching up to us faster than I expected."

We were all eager to go, but Kiroumaru looked like he had all the time in the world.

"Luck is still with us. Look, there's a safe area ahead."

He pointed at a forest of glowing green ribbons swaying in the wind. Flytrappers.

"For some reason, the 'shadow' will not approach the flytrappers. We'll be able to rest once we pass through."

I realized that the waving ribbons were the mites' natural predators. Even if they could fly through the gaps between the flytrappers, instinct would still tell them not to.

"If we scare them like we did last time, they'll all retreat up another level. Please be careful not to touch the flytrappers."

Following Kiroumaru's instructions, we crawled on all fours through the forest of green streamers. The gap between the flytrappers and the floor was barely forty centimeters, so it was quite a struggle, but everyone managed to get through alright.

Looking back, I saw that the cave was so full of mites that light was blocked out altogether, but they stayed a safe distance away from the flytrappers and did not get any closer.

We were safe. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. But the flytrappers might decide to move to a different level at any moment, at which time the mites would descend upon us like hurricane.

In any case, we had to keep going. We came across a number of forks in the tunnel, and when possible we chose the one that went in the direction given by the fake false minoshiro. After about three of these forks, I had already completely lost my sense of direction. If I ever got separated from the group, I would probably end up wandering these tunnels until I died.

We traveled faster from here on out, covering a number of kilometers in a relatively short time. There was a faint sound of clanging metal coming from somewhere. Once, twice, thrice…"

Kiroumaru put his ear against the wall and listened patiently.

"It seems like the enemy has separated into two teams. They are communicating through those sounds as they search for us. …it also appears that there is another troop approaching aboveground."

"How are they making that noise?" Satoru asked.

"Simply by hitting the wall with a hammer and nail…it's a common way to send messages through multiple layers of rock."

"Do you know what they're saying?" I asked.

"No. Each colony has its own cipher. But I assume they're saying that they don't have a grasp on our position right now."

I realized that the enemy was now moving in to surround us on all sides. Just like we had predicted earlier, this was a battle of time.

The real question now was whether the psychobuster still existed after a thousand years.

We stood stunned by the view in front of us.

A sheer precipice dropped away below our feet. The wall on the opposite side had no openings into the tunnels.

Faint, glittering light filtered in from a thin crack above us. There was the sound of water. At first I thought it was an underground lake, but after dropping a piece of paper into the water and seeing it drift slowly away, I realized it was a river.

"We'll have to go upstream from here," Kiroumaru said thoughtfully.

"That's impossible," Inui protested. "There's no boat, no wood to make a raft, and it's too dangerous to swim."

Just thinking about swimming made me shiver. Who knew what sort of creatures lived in the water.

"What if we go aboveground?" Satoru asked. "Most of the enemy is underground, right? At least, the fiend is. So it would be faster to travel above…"

"I do not agree," Kiroumaru said curtly. "The aboveground troops are using birds, so we will be spotted the moment we surface. That information will instantly be relayed underground. Once they know our position, we'll effectively be under their control. We might also be ambushed, and we'll have no idea when or where the fiend will appear."

"But…then what do we do?"

"Let's split into two groups." Kiroumaru leaned over and peered down the cliff. "One group will return to the caves and lead our pursuers away with their scent, then return here. In the meantime, the other group will descend to a lower level and go back the way we came."

"Why go back?" Satoru asked.

"To retrieve the boat and bring it here."

Satoru looked dumbfounded. "Don't be ridiculous. How are we supposed to bring something that big all the way here?"

"This river must flow to the sea. But we didn't notice any rivers near the shore, so that means the mouth is underwater. Coming here underwater would be relatively safe."

There was a silence. No matter which group we were in, it would be exceptionally dangerous.

But we also knew there was no other way.

2

I continued forward carefully, lantern raised high. It was just as humid in here as the previous cave, and water dripped down the walls and ceiling, flowing under my feet in little rivulets. It was difficult to see and I thought I would slip if I lost my concentration for even a second.

"Are you okay?" Inui asked over his shoulder as he pushed ahead with a nimbleness that belied his age.

"Yes. …I could do without all this water though," I grumbled.

"But because of all the moisture, the 'shadow'…the mites don't come here."

Although mites usually preferred humidity, the walls here were so wet that they had difficulty moving. The black widow mites were small enough that the surface tension of the water was enough to trap them, so I really shouldn't complain about it being wet.

The four of us had split up according to Kiroumaru's plan. Inui and I were on our way to the beach to retrieve the boat, and Satoru and Kiroumaru were leaving a fake scent trail.

Satoru had asked me to go get the boat because he said his injury was preventing him from traveling long distances, but his real intention was obvious: he wanted to take on the more dangerous task. Even with Kiroumaru around, it was risky putting yourself right in the enemy's path. Just one misstep and it would be the end.

I knew all this, but accepted Satoru's suggestions anyway.

Everyone was going to survive. I had to believe that.

"Inui, we'll be fine, right?" I asked, hoping to be comforted.

But his answer was not what I expected.

"To be honest, I don't know. Everything here has been beyond my imagination."

"I see…"

An oppressive mood fell over us.

"But I'll make sure you survive no matter what, Watanabe-san. I will do my utmost to that end."

"Thank you. It's reassuring to hear that from you. You're the only survivor from our fierce Wildlife Protection officers after all."

I regretted this immediately after I said it.

"Survivor?" Inui smiled slightly.

"Sorry, that's not what I meant."

"No, no, I just never considered myself a survivor. To me it seems more like I escaped death."

"But…"

"That's how it is. The comrades I lost were closer to me than my family. Surviving them was mere chance…nothing more. I'm like a ghost. I want to avenge my friends; that's all that keeps me bound to this life."

I felt like I had recently heard the same words from someone else.

"The fiend will pay for this," Inui said, his usually placid expression replaced with one of fury. "Please promise me that you will stop the fiend even if I fall before our mission is complete."

"I promise."

Stop… Although we were psychologically restrained from using language stronger than that against humans, I knew what he meant.

"This is what the queerats mean when they call us the gods of death. I guess I can imagine what the people who were hunted back then felt like."

"Me too… I suddenly feel like this world has become a nightmare. That nothing that has happened so far is real. Tomorrow morning, I'll wake up and someone will tell me not to worry, that everything was just a dream…" I was too choked up to continue.

"I know, I can't say I don't feel the same way. But the reality is that we'll need to prepare if we are to wake up tomorrow at all." Inui sighed deeply. "There is something I must say about Kiroumaru."

"Kiroumaru?" I had not expected this topic.

"To be completely honest, I don't know how much we can trust him."

"But…didn't he save you? And without him, where would we be now…?"

"Of course, I'm not denying that."

Inui came to a stop.

"Watanabe-san, under what circumstances do you think people let down their guard?"

I thought for a moment. "When everything is going smoothly, I guess? When you're feeling safe, you tend to lower your defenses."

"It's true that people easily become complacent under those circumstances. But a cautious person would actually be even more alert."

"Then when?"

"In my experience, it's when people think the situation is at its worst. I have never met someone who, in the midst of abject despair, thought that things would get even worse. People want to grasp onto every sliver of hope they can find, and easily overlook signs of further danger."

"You mean we're currently in that situation?"

"Well, you wouldn't expect that, with things as they are now, someone would betray us, right?"

"You mean Kiroumaru is a traitor?"

"I have to consider the possibility."

"Why? Because he's not human? Or do you have some concrete reason?"

"I have two."

Inui held the lantern aloft and began walking again. I followed behind.

"First, it's already suspicious that he's been here before. What did he come for?"

"That…wasn't it because he needed to survey the area? They were fighting with other colonies, so it would be advantageous to find out if the area is of any use to them, or something…"

"Would he really sacrifice a third of his troops for that? A leader like Kiroumaru would usually abort his mission once there was a single loss of life."

"Then why do you think he came here?"

"I don't know. But if it wasn't something he wanted to hide, don't you think he would have explained it to us?"

I had to admit that this had crossed my mind briefly at one point, but had believed that it just wasn't possible. If Kiroumaru really turned out to be a traitor, we' be done for. Now I wasn't sure what to do.

"If he is…" I paused.

There was a strange sound coming from somewhere.

We stopped and listened carefully. Inui pressed his ear to the wall.

It was a deep, rumbling sound coming from far above us.

"What is that sound?"

"Probably one of the tunnels collapsing."

I gasped. "Then maybe our trap worked."

"No…it's not just that, I think. I've already heard that sound intermittently about four times now." Inui thought for a moment, but did not say more.

"Earlier, you said you had two reasons for suspecting Kiroumaru. What's the other reason?"

"You'll find out soon."

"We'll know once we arrive at the shore," Inui said mysteriously.

Although we were much faster going back to the ocean, it still took a number of hours to make the trip. At one of the crevasses that led up to the surface, we consulted the fake false minoshiro, which confirmed that we were less than a hundred meters away from where we had hidden the boat.

I was exhausted and the pain in my feet was unbearable, but there was no time to rest. Supporting myself with cantus, I hiked up the steep slope toward the surface. A disturbing sound came from deep beneath the ground, a cacophonous screech like a million cackling demons.

Startled, I froze on the spot.

"Don't worry, it's just the bats," Inui said.

From the far side of the cave, hundreds of thousands of Tokyo giant bats came streaming out amid deafening screeches. They flapped all around our heads, but did not run into us, thanks to their echolocation abilities.

The bat colony flowed out of the cave like one giant organism and disappeared into the sunset. That's when I realized that it was almost dusk. After entering the tunnels in the morning, I had lost all sense of time. Even though I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, I didn't feel hungry. I was so focused on forcing myself to keep going that I couldn't feel hungry even though I was dizzy from low blood sugar.

The sky was quickly deepening from blue to ultramarine. When we finally reached the surface, the curtain of night had already been drawn across the sky.

We looked out from the lip of the crevasse. The bats looked like a swarm of black mosquitoes dancing in the sky. There had to be at least a hundred million of them. It would be impossible for the enemy's birds to see anything through this. We ducked and ran toward the place where we had hidden the boat.

The boat looked to be undamaged. We quickly hoisted it up with cantus.

As I was about to head toward the shore, Inui stopped me.

"Please wait."

"Why? If we don't hurry, we might be discovered."

"It's dangerous to go near the shore at night, remember?"

I bit my lip. It had completely slipped my mind.

"I'm so careless…"

I opened Inui's knapsack and asked the fake false minoshiro, "People and queerats have been attacked near the shore at night. What's the most dangerous animal here?"

The fake false minoshiro was silent for a moment. I was just starting to worry that it was broken when it started to speak haltingly.

"…is considered to be the giant Bobbit worm…a type of bristle worm. It probably evolved from the Bobbit worm…only within Tokyo Bay…two eyes and antennae…two large pairs of jaws…apex predator…nocturnal…particularly dangerous during mating season."

It went silent.

"Oh no, it's broken!"

"It must be out of power. It's been without sunlight for a while."

"But how will we get to the underwater tunnel…"

"We'll figure out how how to get it working again later. Right now we have to think about how we're going to board the boat safely," Inui said, turning my attention back to the most pressing matter. "Kiroumaru's soldiers were probably attacked by the bristle worm."

I couldn't remember what that looked like.

"You mean the little earthworm-looking things in the ocean?"

"It's related to the Bobbit worm, but think of it as a centipede that lives in the sea. If it attacked and killed a number of queerats, it's safe to assume that it's not small."

Inui suddenly looked grave. "This is my second reason for being suspicious of Kiroumaru. It's easy to predict that it will be dark by the time we get to the shore. But he didn't warn us of any of the dangers that would be present at night. What's more, he didn't give us any information about the bristle worms."

"But isn't it possible that Kiroumaru doesn't know anything about the creature apart from the fact that it attacked his soldiers?" I countered. "Plus he might have assumed that we'd be able to manage with the fake false minoshiro's help."

"…well, perhaps he simply had more pressing matters on his mind," Inui admitted. "Anyway, let's go. If the thing really is a bristle worm, we'll be safer in the boat."

Following Inui's instructions, I got in and closed the top. He levitated the boat and set it down gently a short distance out onto the water.

The bottom of the boat touched sand. It rocked gently left and right to the rhythm of the waves.

The window at the front was at exactly water level and I couldn't see anything. If I hadn't been warned beforehand, I would never have suspected anything dangerous here.

Inui waded carefully into the water and approached from the left. I waited with bated breath to see if the bristle worm would attack, but nothing happened.

I heard him climb up to side of the boat and knock on the door. I opened the latch and looked out at Inui.

"At this time, the creature is…"

There was a crackling sound, like something scrambling up the side of the boat. The next instant, Inui vanished, and a thin, black creature started crawling in through the opening. It looked just like a centipede and moved so quickly that its legs were a blur, but its body was so long that I had more that enough time to attack it.

I set fire to it and the creature let out a hair-raising scream that sounded so human I almost thought it was Inui screaming.

The creature fell back into the water with a huge splash. I scrambled up the ladder and looked down.

What I saw was the most horrible monster in the world. Its legs wriggled disgustingly as it wrapped its undulating body around the boat.

Its head popped out from beneath the water and looked right at me. The creature's face had surprisingly human features; it had no antennae, but was covered in black hair and was glaring at me out of a pair of glittering eyes.

But that was far as its human resemblance went. Apart from two bulging eyes, it had nothing else on its face. Looking along its body, I saw what I assumed was its mouth somewhere around its chest region. Its jaws were like elephant tusks and they clicked ominously open and shut.

I screamed.

The creature rose up like a marionette three meters above the water and lunged at me with its jaws open wide.

The monster's head suddenly exploded a split second before it clamped down on my head.

It writhed around wildly. There was a second, then a third, explosion. The creature convulsed, then fell back into the water and stopped moving.

"Are you okay?" Inui shouted from the water.

"Yes."

It took all my energy just to say that one word. I was still paralyzed with fear, and if Inui hadn't come to the rescue at the last second, I would have been eaten by the monster.

"There might be more of them. We need to get out of here now!"

Inui climbed quickly up the side of the boat and shut the latch as I ducked back inside.

The boat moved forward and slowly began to dive.

I was covered from head to toe in the juices of the exploded worm. It was sticky and smelled like rotten meat, but there was no time to deal with it now, as we had to get out of the creature's hunting grounds. Inui had me turn the outer wheels as he searched for the river mouth from the forward window.

The ocean was already completely black. Inui pressed his face right up against the window to prevent the lantern light from reflecting off the glass. I couldn't help but imagine another one of the worms coming out of nowhere and biting down on the window with its oversized jaws.

Luckily, that didn't happen. Inui discovered a large cave entrance whose entrance was full of waving seaweed, and I was certain that this was the river mouth.

We entered the river. The darkness was even more concentrated here, as if we were traveling through ink instead of water.

I became more and more nervous as we traveled through the tunnel. The boat had a small volume, so we would probably run out of oxygen soon. There had been four of us when we dove in the Tone River, and now there were only two, so theoretically we'd be able to stay under for twice the amount of time. But I didn't know how much oxygen would be used up by the lantern.

"Watanabe-san. Thank you for saving me earlier," Inui said.

"You're the one who saved me."

"No, I mean before that. When I suddenly jumped back into the ocean to escape the creature, but it moved so quickly that it was already waiting to bite where I was about to land. If you hadn't set it on fire, I would have been torn in half."

Without cantus, we wouldn't have stood a chance against the worm. Once again I thought that this place was pure hell. If it wasn't for the psychobuster, I would've ran from here long ago.

Then I thought that it was a good idea to lead the fiend here. If we were lucky, some nasty monster lurking underground might kill the fiend for us.

I let myself be absorbed in these dark fantasies. It was the only way for me to stay sane. To live in hell, you had to become a demon. I tried not to think about my town, my parents, the people I love. I had to concentrate solely on surviving.

The tunnel looked the same no matter how far we went. It was just gently flowing water. No light, no air.

Maybe our fate was to suffocate here. Sweat began to drip from my forehead, though I wasn't sure if it was because of the humidity or my own anxiety. All I knew that it was getting harder to breathe, and it wasn't just because of the stinking worm entrails.

What if we had gone into the wrong tunnel? It was a terrifying thought. But there should only be one underground river in this area.

Or the tunnel might be a dead end where all the water seeped into the water table.

As I turned the wheels of the boat, my mental vision of fantasy and reality began to blur.

I remembered having the same experience before, when I was a child. I was in summer camp, wandering aimlessly around the queerat tunnels.

It appeared that after being in darkness for a long time, even the slightest trigger could put me into a hypnotized state. It was probably because of the ceremony with Head Priest Mushin at the Temple of Purity from a long time ago.

That time too, I had slowly entered a trance and felt my physical body disappearing as my mind floated in a dark void.

I started hearing things.

"Saki. Saki."

A voice was calling me from somewhere.

"Who is it…?" I whispered.

"Saki, it's me," said the familiar voice.

"You're…"

The faceless boy.

"You can't remember my name anymore, can you? It's alright. I'm always with you. I live in your heart."

"In my heart?"

"Yes. Cantus is the power that etches our thought onto the outside world. Our souls are, in the end, our thoughts. A part of my soul is etched deep within your heart."

"But why? What happened to you?"

"You've forgotten that too? That's fine. You'll remember eventually."

"At least tell me your name."

"You know my name. Somebody's left a barrier in your mind that prevents you from remembering."

"Watanabe-san? Are you okay?" Inui asked uncertainly.

"Yes…I'm fine."

I felt like my mind had been split in two and someone else was answering for me.

"Saki. Saki, there's no need to worry. That's all I wanted to tell you."

"But can I really defeat the fiend?"

"Fiend? You've misunderstood. That's not a fiend…"

The voice retreated into the distance and was replaced a different sound.

"Watanabe-san! Please get a hold of yourself. Are you okay?" Inui said loudly.

I returned to reality.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I was just nodding off…"

The two halves of my mind slowly came together.

"We're surfacing?"

"Now?"

"The flow has slowed and I can see what I believe to be the surface. There appears to be a large tunnel above."

The boat floated up through the still, dark water.

Inui opened the top latch, listening carefully for any sounds.

I breathed a sigh of relief as fresh air came into the cabin.

"This is a rather spacious tunnel. It was probably built a long time ago."

He climbed out onto the deck and I followed. We seemed to be inside a giant stone dome.

"Stars?" I asked when I looked up.

I immediately realized they weren't stars. The green, twinkling lights on the ceiling of the dome looked familiar.

"Glowworms…"

This was on a different scale than the ones I had seen in the queerat tunnels years ago. There were so many glowworms that it seemed like there was an entire galaxy above us. The dark water looked like the dark night sky as it reflected their light.

"It's my first time seeing them too. They attract insects with that light," Inui said, sounding fascinated.

"Without any of their competitors, the flytrappers, around, the glowworms have taken over. …I see. There are no holes in the ceiling. The driller worms don't seem to be able to penetrate the stone. Maybe it's too thick, or too hard. In any case, that's why there aren't any flytrappers."

At that moment, an unrelated scene appeared in my mind.

A ripple spread out from our boat, and the waves disappeared.

"Wow, that's amazing…"

It was as if the water had been frozen over. Any imperfection was been smoothed out and the surface looked like polished glass–a giant mirror reflecting every star in the sky.

"Beautiful. It's like I'm in space."

I would remember this night until the day I died.

We floated not on a river, but the Milky Way.

"What's the matter?" Inui asked when I suddenly froze.

"No…it's nothing." I turned and looked around at the dome, trying to hide my tears from him.

A perfect moment, a perfect world…

Then I remembered. The one who had shown me that scenery was the faceless boy.

"It's almost done charging." Inui looked up, his forehead covered in sweat from intense concentration.

"Thank you…it's amazing you're able to do that. If I were here alone, I really don't know what I'd do," I said sincerely.

"From a technical perspective, it's not difficult. I figured you just have to give it light of the same wavelength as sunlight so…" he looked over at the lantern and torch he had struggled so hard to make. "If we can start this thing up and ask how to make a solar battery, the rest will be easy. I don't know how the solar panel converts light to electricity, but I can feed it electricity directly with cantus if that's all it needs."

He unfastened the battery cover and pointed at the wires.

I had no idea what image to use for something abstract like electricity. Satoru was also good with machines, so maybe this was something boys were naturally better at.

It only took a short while before the fake false minoshiro was running again. Even though it had appeared to be off this whole time, it had still been keeping track of our position and was able tell us where we were instantly. Fortunately, we had gone up the correct tunnel.

I asked Inui to go back into the boat so I could wash in the river and change my clothes. Once the stinking slime was off of me, I felt much better, though still not entirely optimistic, about the task

ahead. All we had to do now was to meet up with Satoru and Kiroumaru and use the fake false minoshiro to find our way to the old, abandoned building.

I immediately realized how naive my thinking was.

In the time it had taken for us to travel up the river, evening had deepened into night.

Satoru and Kiroumaru were nowhere to be seen when we arrived at the meeting place.

We waited for a while, but Inui finally made the decision to move on.

"Let's go. We can't waste any more time."

"But we can't just leave them behind…" I protested, even though I knew it was the right thing to do.

"We'll have to trust that they're safe. They might be hiding somewhere trying to lure the fiend out. …it's taken a lot of time to get here. We have an important mission, so we need to put that first."

We set off in the boat again.

Compared to the tunnel earlier, the river here was much narrower, but thankfully the ceiling wasn't too low. For some reason, there were no stalactites here, and the tunnel appeared to be completely manmade…like an old railway tunnel or something.

The fact that we couldn't see any holes from the driller worms probably meant this was high-quality concrete. I had a feeling that Central Government Building No. 8 wasn't far ahead.

In no time, we entered a wide space. It wasn't as large as the dome with the glowworm planetarium, but it was still quite high. The fake false minoshiro said that this was a subway station.

As we moved through the darkness, the lantern slowly revealed traces of human activity from long ago. It gave me a creepy feeling.

The boat went slowly up the wide river, then suddenly came to a halt. There was a wall in front of us.

"The river ends here…?"

"It probably goes underground again. Let's dive down and see."

As if complaining about being overworked, the boat creaked and groaned as it dived.

We searched along the wall from the little window and realized two things. One, that there were many openings through which water was flowing, and two, none were big enough for the boat to pass through.

"This is bad. It's impossible to continue in the boat."

"Can we widen the hole?"

"Water might burst through all at once, and if we're really unlucky, the entire tunnel could collapse."

Why did we come all this way, I thought bitterly to myself.

"How far are we from the building," I asked the fake false minoshiro.

"Roughly a hundred meters. Once you go up exit A19 ahead, you'll be in the building."

I felt my resolve strengthen. We had come this far. There was no reason to hesitate for the last hundred meters.

"Will you function in water?" Inui asked.

"The Toshiba Solar Autonomous Archive SP-SPTA-6000 is fully water resistant up to 13 bar pressure, and operational up to a maximum depth of 120 meters," it reported proudly, having no idea what sort of fate it was about to meet.

"I'll go first and come back if everything looks okay."

I shook my head. "We'll go together. It's better to have two people if something happens."

"But…"

"If anything happens to you, I won't be able to continue on anyway. So we might as well throw our lots in together," I said.

We went back and forth for a while, but Inui gave in in the end. We resurfaced and exited the boat.

Underwater walking was not one of my strong suits. I wished I had worked harder at it in Sage Academy, but it was too late for that now.

We gathered air from the tunnel and forced it underwater, creating two giant bubbles.

Inui went first. I followed, a little reluctantly since I had just changed into clean clothes. The water was cold as ice.

With weights on our back, we sank slowly to the bottom of the river. The bubble enclosed the lantern and the upper half of my body. There should be enough air for a few minutes.

Walking underwater was more tiring than I imagined. There was a lot of resistance, and the flow of the river, slow as it was, kept pushing me back. The weight that prevented me from floating up to the surface also impeded my movements.

The inside of the bubble reflected the lantern light, making it almost impossible to see out. I had to stick my head out of the bubble every once in a while to make sure I was on the right track.

Thankfully, the bottom of the river was a lot flatter than I had anticipated. The walls too retained most of the shape from when they had been built during the ancient civilization. Maybe concrete lasted longer when it was covered with water.

A dozen meters into the tunnel, Inui began waving the lantern around, signaling that he had found the exit mentioned by the fake false minoshiro. I poked my head out of the bubble and saw a rectangular opening. The stairs must be just after that.

Just a little more. I unconsciously sped up. No, wait, something wasn't right. Inui was waving his arms around wildly. What was going on?

The next instant, I was wrenched from the bubble. Inui threw me up against the top of the tunnel. Before I had time to wonder what was happening, a large shadow flashed by beneath the water.

It was a giant bristle worm even bigger than the one before. Having lost me as a target, it turned and made a beeline for Inui. He had no time to dodge. The worm's jaws snapped down on his neck. At that instant, the worm burst into a million pieces, dyeing the water completely red.

The lantern light vanished, plunging everything into darkness. I fought desperately to keep myself from panicking. Because of the weight on my back, I felt myself sinking down again. I threw off my knapsack and floated back up. The wind had been knocked out of me when I was thrown against the ceiling and now I was running out of air. I reached out and felt around blindly.

There. A pocket of air against the ceiling. It must be the part of the bubble we brought. There wasn't enough air to enclose my head, so I had to put my mouth against the bubble and breathe that way.

There was no time to lose. All I could think of was survival. There wasn't enough air for me to go back, so I had to make it the next hundred meters to the exit.

The exit should be right ahead. As I was about to swim toward it I suddenly dived again and retrieved my knapsack. The fake false minoshiro was in it.

I went step by step. Don't think. Don't breathe, I thought to myself as I groped my way forward.

But I never arrived at the exit. Maybe I had gotten the direction wrong. Just as I felt my heart drop, I touched a wall. I ran my hands along both sides to make sure. My left hand felt emptiness. The exit. I kept going. One step, two steps, three steps in the darkness… My foot hit something. The stairs. I went up carefully. I couldn't breathe. I needed air.

Don't think. Just walk. One step at a time.

My consciousness began to fade. I couldn't hold back the urge to exhale anymore.

The stairs continued endlessly. I couldn't do it anymore. I dropped my knapsack and paddled upward with everything I had. My last bit of air escaped from my nose.

I broke the surface of the water, wheezing and desperately sucking in the stale, moldy air. There might have been harmful gases mixed in the air, but I didn't care. Tears ran down my face as I breathed as deeply as I could in between fits of coughing.

Safe. I stumbled up the stairs and collapsed on the ground, sobbing. Inui had given up his life to save me, and now I was all alone in this hell.

It was strange that the wooden interior of the building had withstood a millennium of weathering better than what was supposed to be the most advanced concrete.

The first and second floors of Central Government Building No. 8 were preserved in near-perfect condition. There appeared to be a few reasons for this. First, the high-tech concrete had kept the shape of the building even after all the rebar inside it had rotted away. Second, the underground levels and foundation had been covered with water. Third, it had been covered by concrete from other collapsed buildings, so after all the fighting and destruction was over, and the area had been covered by karst formations, the building remained protected.

With the fake false minoshiro held in my left arm, and a torch in my right, I made my way through the dark building. The fake false minoshiro apparently had a lighting function, but I couldn't afford to waste its battery. Now that Inui was gone, there was no way to charge it but to go back up to the surface.

Earlier, when I had turned back to get my knapsack with the fake false minoshiro, I had thought I would die. But when I thought about how Inui had risked his life to protect me, it seemed almost trivial. The fact that he had managed to take his enemy down with him was a testament to the skills of the Wildlife Protection officers. Thanks to him, I was still alive now. If the bristle worm happened to have survived, and I came across it again, I would be nothing more than bait.

If that happened, I would be breaking my promise to Inui. I had sworn to stop the fiend no matter what.

I took a few slow, deep breaths.

Before me was a building that had been left in cold darkness for ages. Something about it provoked a deep, primal fear within me.

The once-pleasing decor in the rooms had collapsed and melted together into unrecognizable blobs. Even more surprising was that tree roots from the surface had penetrated the building, covering part of the floor in sprawling tendrils. I had thought that Tokyo was nothing more than a barren wasteland, but it seemed that some plants had managed to survive. Just as I was wondering how the roots had manage to pierce through concrete that even driller worms couldn't, I came across a shaft behind a crumbling metal door. The fake false minoshiro told me that it was called an elevator and was used to transport people from one floor to the next.

I cut off a couple of thick roots and made a torch. The wood was full of water and would not have burned without continual use of cantus, but the upside was that it burned slowly.

But did the thing I was searching for even exist in these ruins? The more I thought about it, the more unlikely it seemed.

There had been two room numbers listed in my mother's letter, but the doors in the building were so rotten that I couldn't read anything on them.

I found nothing on the first floor, apart from two skeletons that made me shriek when I came across them. Judging by the tattered rags lying around them, the seemed to have been wearing some sort of white clothing. The bigger one was probably male, and the smaller one a female. The bones were too damaged for me to guess their cause of death.

I went up a floor and found a room that was different from the other ones I had seen so far. It had a metal door that hadn't been corroded, and although the words on it had faded, there was a symbol that stood out clearly.

"What does this mean?" I asked.

"Biohazard. There is some sort of biological danger, such as disease-causing bacteria, inside this room."

So that meant it was logical to assume the psychobuster might be in there.

Holding back my excitement, I pulled on the metal door, but it didn't budge. Maybe it was locked, or the bolt had rusted.

I stepped back and opened the door with cantus. The metal made a horrible screeching as I ripped it off its hinges and stepped inside.

The room looked like a laboratory. There was muddy water and broken glass all over the floor. Against the wall was what looked like a safe with the biohazard symbol on it. If the psychobuster existed, it was probably in there.

I tied up the fake false minoshiro with some roots and set it on a table. My heart raced wildly as I put my hand on the safe door. We had sacrificed so much just to get here. Would I finally get the devil's weapon?

The safe opened without needing a key.

It was empty.

I let out the breath I had been holding.

It seemed like the broken glass had once been some sort of container holding the psychobuster inside the safe. I didn't have to ask the fake false minoshiro to know that the muddy water would have destroyed it.

I looked around the room again just to make sure, but there was nothing.

Carrying the fake false minoshiro, I went up another floor. As I expected, there was nothing. What could I even expect to find in a building that had been abandoned for over a thousand years?

I decided to check all the floors. I had no idea how much time had passed. Even as my hopes waned, I wanted to see things through to the end. If I didn't, it would be an insult to those who had died.

I finally emerged onto an aboveground level.

The whole place was buried under the sand, so the only evidence that this floor was once aboveground was that all the rooms had large windows. Some of the sand had spilled into the building, and rain seeping in had turned them into pools of muddy water. The puddles that had been in the lab were probably from rain as well.

The room I was in was situated in the middle of the level. It looked about the same as all the other rooms, except for the very large wooden table sitting at one end of it. I was sure that this room had once belonged to some executive officer.

Looking around, it seemed to be just a normal office, without any spaces to hide dangerous biological weapons. Just as I thought that, the torchlight fell upon a rectangular shape against one of the walls.

I went closer to examine it. A forty square centimeter area of the concrete wall was covered by metal. It looked like a door of some sort with a knob on it.

"What's this?" I asked without much hope.

"A safety deposit box. They are used to store valuables, and the one here appears to be a concealed safe. The wallpaper or painting that had once hidden it must have disappeared at some point."

I didn't need any further explanation. I tried violently to break the door open with cantus. The safe was much thicker and stronger than the one in the lab and I couldn't damage it at all. The concrete around it started to crack and looked like it was going to collapse.

I changed tactics and attempted to bore through the door. I had never seen this kind of metal before and was surprised to find it so resistant to cantus.

Eventually, I managed to carve a lopsided hole into the door and pull it out with a loud screech. It was over ten centimeters thick.

Torch in hand, I peered into the safe.

3

There was something inside. A metal container that looked like a pencil case. And a thick envelope.

I took out the box first. There was a strange mark on the top that showed a red circle around a big-headed alien-looking creature that had its arms spread wide. A diagonal line through the circle seemed to be stopping the creature from coming out.

I fumbled to open the box for a while before spotting a small button that popped open the lid.

The contents were totally unexpected. It was a cross. About seven or eight centimeters long, made of a glass-like material that had become cloudy with age. That wasn't the strange part.

A large ring went through the cross, passing through three of the arms. It reminded me of a goat or devil's horns and the whole thing gave me a bad feeling.

The fake false minoshiro said this was a celtic cross. It was a Christian cross to which the Celts had added a circle signifying the cycle of life and death. But the design of this cross had been created by secret Christians in the ancient civilization when Christianity had been forbidden, and used as a sort of family crest.

I returned the cross to the case and opened the letter. There were a couple sheets folded inside. Unfolding them, I was astonished to find that the paper had not yellowed at all, and the ink was as vibrant as if it had just dried. But I couldn't read it because it wasn't in Japanese.

The fake false minoshiro scanned the letter and began translating.

"Exorcism declaration. To cleanse those who have been possessed by the devil, and return to them their humanity, we declare holy war against that most wicked…"

The contents showed the frightening extremes people were capable of reaching when led astray by hysteria and narrow-minded religious fanaticism.

"…the ingenuity of a demon is a gift that asks for nothing in return. In granting us the terrible power of psychokinesis, he has already seen the destruction that lies a thousand years in our future. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This does not apply just to political power. If you possess a power greater than you can tame, it will sooner or later destroy you, and everything around you."

The fake false minoshiro reciting all this in its soft female voice gave me the creeps, but I didn't tell it to stop. This and the cross had something to do with the psychobuster, so I needed to hear everything.

"…as the power itself is undeniably evil, it cannot help but turn those who possess it into demons and witches. The much maligned Malleus Maleficarum from six centuries past is vindicated by the appearance of these witches, and proves that witch hunts were not the product of mass hysteria. Even back when technology had not yet advanced enough to prove the existence of psychokinesis, there were people who instinctively knew it existed, and of its dangers. And if some were misrecognized, or falsely accused in the battle to exorcise these demons from society, it was all for the good of mankind."

I only learned about the Malleus Maleficarum and the two monks who authored it (no matter how I looked it, I thought they were the ones who should have been exorcised) after everything was over. If it had been published today, it would have been listed as class four, "bewitching" or "catastrophic". If book burning was still practiced, this book would have been first on the list.

The unbearable diatribe against people with cantus went on for a while, but we finally got the to the relevant part.

"…therefore we have no choice but to kill and cleanse those with the demonic power. There is only one effective way to do that–strong toxicity bacillus anthracis, commonly known as psychobuster. It is truly a blessing from God. Hallelujah. He always provides in our time of need."

The religious ranting went on until it finally came to the instructions on how to use the psychobuster.

"The blessed powder is to be used to fight political and religious terrorism. It can be delivered in an envelope, or sprayed directly at the target. It is fitting that we have been granted a weapon as sacred as the medal of Saint Benedict for our holy war."

Saint Benedict was a Christian saint from the ancient civilization, whose image engraved upon a medal along with the cross, was said to ward off evil.

"This is the cross of righteousness and redemption. When thrown at the demon, it will release an inert gas that propels the sacred powder. Just the smallest amount will, even a millennium later, kill any demon who inhales it. Hallelujah…"

I closed my eyes and listened to the fake false minoshiro translate all the way to the end. Then I took the cross out of its box again.

A deadly bacterium had been sealed inside for a millennium. Just the thought was enough to make my hands tremble. At that moment, I happened to see the cross from a different angle.

It wasn't a cross. What I had thought was a celtic cross design was actually the biohazard symbol.

I didn't think there was any practical reason for the design. Whoever had made this had a seriously twisted sense of humor.

With extreme caution, I put the cross back into the case.

I would have to release the devil from this concrete grave. But this seed of hatred was the only hope I had left.

My legs buckled from exhaustion as I tried to stand up. Maybe I should rest for just a little while. Then I'd try to meet up with Satoru and Kiroumaru, but if that didn't work, then I'd have to kill the fiend on my own. Either way, I had to get out of here first.

Should I go out through the underwater tunnel again? If I could get back to the boat… It would be hard to steer on my own, but I'd manage somehow. Then it wouldn't be hard to get back to the meeting point.

No. It was too dangerous–I had no way to defend myself. If I ran into another bristle worm, there would be no one around to help me. The two that had attacked us had been killed, but the scent of Inui's blood might draw more of them.

But what should I do if I couldn't go that route? I wondered if I could open a hole from the building to the surface. But everything up there would be under surveillance, and it would be almost impossible to deceive the bird spies. Once I was spotted I might not be able to escape…

Then I remembered the bats. If I timed my movements with the bats coming back into the cave, the sky would be completely blocked out and no one would see me.

What time was it?

"What time was it when we were at the bat cave last time?"

"About an hour and a half from now, yesterday," the fake false minoshiro answered instantly.

"Wake me up when it gets to that time."

"Confirmed."

I leashed the fake false minoshiro to my arm and curled up on the ground. In a second, I was deeply asleep.

A deafening sound rang out. I was instantly awake.

"It is 4:05 am. Sunrise is in 31 minutes. I believe the bats will be returning soon."

Already? I didn't feel like I had slept at all. But the fake false minoshiro was probably right.

I sat up and started preparing to leave. Not that there was much to prepare. I had already burned up my backpack, and the only things I really needed were the fake false minoshiro and the psychobuster.

Maybe this was the last time I would wake up. I shook my head to chase away the unpleasant thoughts. There was no point dwelling on it.

Right now, I had to do what I had to do.

I left the cursed room. I thought I could feel the former occupant, the one who came up with that fanatical religious tirade a thousand years ago, watching me as I went.

I went up another floor, to the second aboveground level. Unlike the first floor, over half of it had been flattened and filled with sand.

I tried to find a place that exited closest to the ground outside. It was still dark outside, so I could barely see anything, but eventually found a spot where I could feel a faint breeze. There was a crack in the building wall that seemed to go through to the outside.

Listening carefully, I could hear the cries of thousands of bats. It seemed like they were returning. I had to leave now and find a place to hide.

As quietly as I could, I chipped away at the crack in the wall.

Two or three minutes later, I had made a hole big enough to slip through. I ducked and crawled through.

The faint starlight revealed a world that was as barren as the one I had just left.

Of the few ruined buildings that were left, none were more than two or three stories tall. The metal structures had rotted away long ago, and the super long-lasting concrete was just barely able to hold up what was left of the buildings.

The collapsed ruins of the buildings had been weathered into nothing more than grey boulders that had then been dissolved and reformed into karst columns. Here and there, stripes that resembled black rivers ran along the ground. The fake false minoshiro said that they were paved roads that had lost their shape due to long periods of exposure to ultraviolet rays.

There were few plants apart from weeds. The trees were stunted and twisted due to being blasted by the fierce winter winds of the Kanto plain. The soil at the surface was too porous to hold water so the trees had no choice but to use all their energy to grow roots to search for water down below.

The sky was obscured by fluttering bats. If it took them the same amount of time to return as it did for them to leave yesterday, I had one, or two hours, tops. In that time, I had to find the cliff where I had parted with Satoru.

I walked from the shadow of one building to the next, following the fake false minoshiro's directions.

The enemy might not only be watching the sky. There might be troops on the ground nearby as well.

Jogging in the predawn darkness, I felt a strange shift in my consciousness.

What was this feeling? Deja-vu? I was certain I had never been to this place before. Yet, my surroundings felt familiar, like I had seen them a long time ago.

Was it another dream? No, it couldn't be. My mind was totally clear. Then why…

I looked at the stunted trees around me.

The trees began to show signs of deformation. Most of them leaned in the same direction, as if they had been bent over from an unceasing wind.

For a while now I had been plagued by an uneasy feeling.

Leave. Now. Run as far away from here as possible. That was what my gut was telling me. I didn't want to stay here a second longer.

But I thought about ■, and tried desperately to encourage myself. I couldn't turn back now. I was the only one who could save him.

I kept going, using the deformed plants as guides. The forest seemed to be twisted in a spiral. If that was the case, then ■ had to be at the center.

The silhouette of the trees resembled giant, tentacled monsters, beckoning toward me. I continued onward, ducking and dodging under the branches.

What was that? I blinked. A different scene was superimposed on my current surroundings.

Was I hallucinating? I put my hand against the wall of a nearby building and steadied myself. The concrete was rough and pitted from years of exposure to the elements.

Before my eyes, the walls began to warp and shake. What looked like bubbles appeared and burst one after another. It was a chaotic scene. My head began to hurt again.

I jerked my hand back, gasping in fear. It was impossible. Concrete couldn't bend like that.

But it wasn't a hallucination.

I had really seen that. I was absolutely sure of it.

The clamor of the bats went up another pitch. It was getting light. The night was over.

Looking up, I saw thousands, maybe millions, of bats flapping in unison like some giant dragon in the dawn sky.

Long chains of them drifted like ribbons in the sky. They looked like…

The rising sun bathed them in pink light.

Suddenly the area was lit as if by a spotlight. I looked up and saw that the aurora filled the entire sky. A curtain of pale green hung across the sky, blended with ripples of red, pink and purple light.

I felt hot tears flooding down my cheeks.

My memory hadn't been altered completely. No matter what clever methods they used, they couldn't just erase things that were inconvenient for them. They could only hide it in the deep recesses of the mind.

I remembered everything afresh. It was as if I had broken the seal on my memories and flung open the door.

On that night, I had been traveling through a dark forest to meet him.

The faceless boy. That's right, his name was…

My eyes widened in surprise.

On that concrete wasteland, he suddenly appeared not ten meters in front of me.

"Shun!" I shouted.

Shun turned and began to run.

"Wait!"

I ran desperately after him.

He disappeared and reappeared among the broken husks of the buildings, moving as swiftly as the wind.

I forgot all about hiding from the enemy and just ran.

I lost sight of Shun as he rounded a building. When I turned the corner, he was standing there, completely still.

He was no more than a dozen meters away.

"Shun! Why…?"

I had no idea what I wanted to ask.

Shun raised his head slowly and smiled. The familiarity of that smile burned in my chest.

Just then, the rising sun came up over the mountains of rubble and he was enveloped in a blinding light.

And just as suddenly, the magical moment was over. I was left standing there, dumbstruck.

"Are you alright?"

It wasn't Shun who asked. In fact, it wasn't even human.

"How did you come here? What happened to Inui-san?" Kiroumaru asked in rapid succession, looking uncharacteristically surprised.

"I…Shun…no, what happened to Satoru?" I finally managed to sputter.

"He is in a nearby cave. He was injured, so I left alone to find you and Inui-san."

"Injured? What kind of injury?"

"Don't worry, it is nothing serious. His life is not in danger."

It might not be serious according to Kiroumaru's standards, but I was still worried.

"Let's go meet up with him. …how did he get injured?"

"When the fiend was pursuing us, a piece of rock hit him from above," he said as we walked.

"There are far fewer bats now. We must hurry."

We entered through a gaping hole in the ground, that had probably been made by water seeping into the concrete. It looked just like a doline.

"Saki!" Satoru shouted. "You're okay. I was worried.'

He looked to be in quite a state. The bloodsucker slug wound on his left shoulder hadn't healed yet, and the bandage on his right arm was red with blood.

"Where's Inui?"

I shook my head slowly. Satoru's face fell. He lowered his head as if to pay his last respects.

"I'm sure he went bravely."

"Yes. We were attacked by a bristle worm in the underground river. If Inui had been alone, I'm sure he would have survived. But he tried to protect me…" I couldn't continue.

"Saki, we won't let his sacrifice be in vain."

"Of course. …I found it. It wouldn't have been possible without Inui."

"Really? You found it?"

"Here, look."

I handed over the metal box I had tied shut with tree roots. Wincing from his wounds, Satoru untied the knots and opened the box. He squinted at the cross.

"Careful! We're doomed if it breaks. I think it's enough if we smash it open in his path when the time comes."

I gave them a short summary about what had happened when I found the psychobuster.

"Okay." Satoru took the cross and hung it around his neck.

"What do you plan to do?"

"If we keep it in the box, we won't be able to get it in time if the fiend appears out of nowhere. I'll carry it."

"You can't; you're injured. I'll do it."

"I'm not so badly hurt that I can't smash it open," he replied calmly.

He seemed ready to sacrifice himself if it came to it.

"But I–"

"Alright. We can take turns. I'll go first," he said.

I didn't argue. In any case, the tunnels were so narrow that if we smashed it open in here, we would probably all be infected anyway.

"It is dangerous to stay in one place for too long. We should start moving." Kiroumaru spoke for the first time in a while.

"But what do we do now?"

"With the retrieval of the psychobuster, we have fulfilled our main objective. Withdrawing for the time being seems sound to me. On the other hand, this might be an one in a million opportunity. The focal point of our strategy, the fiend, has only a weak escort and is close to our position."

Kiroumaru bared his teeth in a grin.

"There's another advantage to this. The enemy believes they are hunting us, and in their focused pursuit they will not realize until the end that they have become the hunted. Additionally, they do not know that we have obtained the psychobuster. Should we really pass up this chance?"

I glanced over at Satoru. He nodded quietly. We knew this was our only chance. Even if we all died in the process, we had to stop the fiend here and now.

Kiroumaru took of the priest robes and washed himself thoroughly. Then he smeared mud and guano all over his body.

"The stink is terrible…" I pinched my nose.

Queerats had a much better sense of smell than humans, but Kiroumaru seemed to be bearing it a lot better than I was.

"I feel the same, but this isn't the time to complain. I must hide my scent completely."

He smeared his face as if applying makeup.

"They pursue your scent like madmen, but for some reason do not show much interest in mine."

"Why?"

"Well, I guess they are not very interested in me to begin with. Perhaps they believe that I will not be much of a threat if left to my own devices. They underestimate me."

"Kiroumaru dealt them a serious blow. Maybe they want to keep their distance," Satoru said, holding his nose and barely moving his mouth as if that would stop him from smelling the guano.

"Did he really kill that many of them?"

"Yeah. It was quite a display. He took out seven of them."

"That many? How?"

"First he lured them out with our scent and led them to the cave where the black widow mites lived. It wasn't a pretty sight. The group broke apart as they all tried to run away. But Kiroumaru wasn't done yet. He baited another group of mites and invaded the enemy's camp. Without their guards, Yakomaru and the fiend were forced to flee again. But this time the plan backfired. Without anything to feed on, the mites started coming after us. That was also when we realized that although they couldn't move around on damp walls, they could travel on water just fine."

"Really?"

"They can stick together like balls of algae and float on the water. …still, the fact that they were all stuck together made it that much more easier to burn them all at once."

As Satoru excitedly continued his story, I began to have doubts once again. How exactly was Kiroumaru able to kill all those queerats?

"Did he really kill seven enemy soldiers?"

"Yeah. But that's only what I was able to see. There were probably more."

"But didn't he say that there were only seven in total at the very beginning?"

"As the underground troop was injured, more came from aboveground. Still, the ground troops probably didn't have enough soldiers to make up for all the losses, so we think the underground team has five members now," Kiroumaru explained, looking more like a golem every minute as the covered himself in muck.

"Hey, why didn't you warn us about the Bobbit worm?"

Kiroumaru cocked his head. "What is that?"

"The bristle worm creature near the beach. Because of it, Inui…"

He let out a long sigh. "I didn't think it was necessary to bring up the dangers that appear near the shores at night. Sorry, I might have if you were alone, but you had a Wildlife Protection Officer with you, one we call the 'god of death'. Also, I did not know the identity of the creature. It's true I lost a lot of my soldiers to it, but I never had a chance to see it."

Satoru placed a hand on my shoulder to stop me from interrogating Kiroumaru further.

"This is not good.." Kiroumaru said, his nose twitching. "It's started raining aboveground."

"Why is that bad?" Satoru asked.

"Usually it's a good thing since it helps wash away your scent, but right now we want them to follow our scent trail."

The sound of rain was finally reached our ears.

"This tunnel won't flood, so don't worry about that. There are dozens of tunnels deeper underground for the water to drain from…"

Rain was streaming through multiple holes in the ceiling. The sound echoed cacophonously throughout the tunnels.

"Hurry. We need to finish this battle as soon as possible."

We followed Kiroumaru deeper underground, going from large, arterial tunnels to small, capillary-like ones.

He never seemed to lose his way even for a second as we went down the branching paths.

I could hear Satoru breathing laboriously. His wounds were taking their toll on him.

After a while, the tunnels started sloping upward. The stones became more and more slippery from the rain and we had to step carefully.

Just as I was wondering how long the slope was going to go on, we reached the top. We must have been close to the surface since the rain was much louder here. There was also a faint light coming from somewhere that might have been stronger if it weren't pouring outside.

"We'll set the trap here," Kiroumaru said.

I looked where he pointed and saw a hole in the rock three or four meters across.

"This was probably a tunnel made a thousand years ago. The good thing is that it goes on without branching for a kilometer and a half before exiting aboveground."

"Why is that good? We'll only have one way to escape," Satoru said, grimacing in pain.

"It's easier to calculate their distance to us when there's only one route they can take. But there are enough complicated curves throughout the tunnel that we can try to stay ahead and out of sight."

His remaining green eye glinted unpleasantly from his mud-covered face. Rain and sweat were starting to wash off muck.

"Still, although it doesn't branch, there are still a number of small paths leading off from it. They are all dead ends though, so make sure not to go down any of them."

"How do we tell the paths apart from the main tunnel?" I asked uneasily.

"They look completely different. They're much narrower than the tunnel and are not rounded. You won't get lost as long as you follow the main tunnel."

His tone of voice suggested that he found it quite pitiful that I had no sense of direction.

"…but is this really the best place to do it?" Satoru asked.

"For our purposes, this is the only place," Kiroumaru said confidently. "This wind is our greatest advantage."

There was a breeze coming from up ahead. For some unknown reason, there were constant breezes criss-crossing through underground Tokyo, creating complicated airstreams.

We would be heading straight into the wind and the fiend would be downwind from us. That way, when we broke open the psychobuster, only the fiend would be infected.

But would it go that smoothly? We all felt incredibly apprehensive, but couldn't come up with a better alternative.

"This is a bad omen… The rain is heavier than I had expected," Kiroumaru said, looking up at the ceiling, listening to sounds we couldn't hear. "The original idea was to lure the fiend through the tunnel and use the psychobuster before we get to the exit. But I am beginning to think that may not be such a reliable plan."

"Why not?"

"The rain is washing away our scent. We need to force the fiend to come after us no matter what. A better bait…no we need a decoy."

"Hey, wait just a sec. What do you mean by decoy…" Satoru said, a note of doubt in his voice.

"Let the fiend catch sight of you, if only for an instant, then run into the tunnel. It won't be able to control itself and come after you."

"Are you insane? You want us to play tag with the fiend? We'll be within its striking distance," Satoru shouted. "It's impossible. If we stumble for even a second and get into its line of sight, we're dead."

"You are both healthy adults. The fiend is just a child. You should be able to run faster than it."

"Don't be stupid!"

"There's another thing. The psychobuster needs to be released at close distance. With all this moisture in the air, the powder won't be able to travel very far. And if you don't do it right, it might just stick to the walls," Kiroumaru continued, ignoring Satoru.

"No way. It's impossible," I said, looking right into his eyes.

"Impossible? What do you mean?" he returned my look coldly.

"I mean…"

"How many do you think have been sacrificed to get you this far?" Kiroumaru said harshly. "It is understandable that you do not care for the lives of my species. But how many people, starting with Inui-san, have given their lives for you? They all died so you could have this one moment, this one chance to kill the fiend. They trusted you enough to pay the ultimate price. Are you going to waste this one and only chance? Did you come all the way here only to back out like frightened children at the last minute?"

I hung my head in shame, unable to respond

"You still have the chance to kill the fiend and survive. A very good chance, in fact. You just need to have courage in this moment. …if you don't, you will regret it for the rest of your lives. You may live a little longer, but sooner or later, the fiend will kill you. When that happens, the last thing to go through your minds will be overwhelming regret. Why did I waste the opportunity to kill the fiend…"

His words cut through my heart like a sword.

"…yes. You're right," Satoru said quietly. "We came here, ready to lay down our lives, with one goal in mind. Are we going to stop now because we're afraid? …but what are you going to do? Are you just going to watch while we gamble our lives playing tag with the fiend? That's convenient for you."

Kiroumaru's eyes flashed. "You sound like a spoiled child. 'Why do I have to die but the queerat doesn't? That's not fair. It should die first.'"

"Watch your tongue! How dare you!" Satoru snapped.

"Fine, please suggest an alternative since you don't like any of my ideas. If you have an idea to kill the fiend that requires me to throw away my life, I will do it in an instant. …or you could kill me yourself right now. There's only one reason not to. You would have no one left to bait the fiend."

"But if you lure it here, won't it just keep chasing you?" Satoru said, sounding remorseful now.

"This is the crucial point. In order to separate the fiend from its guards, you two must be the bait. The fiend will come after you, but the soldiers will be too afraid to. If I were the bait, the fiend wouldn't be interested." Kiroumaru shook his head sadly. "I cannot force you. On the other contrary, I would be no more than a worm crushed by your wrath if I were to invoke your ire. …the decision is yours to make."

My vague doubts about Kiroumaru were still swirling around inside me. It's impossible to succeed at anything if you wanted all your plans to be fail-proof, but I couldn't help but feel uncertain.

At least now I knew what I needed to do.

It had been two hours since Kiroumaru had taken our underclothes to leave a scent trail.

In that time, we had finished scoping out the entire length of the tunnel that was to be our final battleground.

"It's in better condition than I expected. The ground is pretty smooth, and there aren't any rocks or things that could trip us. …the only thing we need to watch out for are the three places where the

tunnel splits off," Satoru said, running through the course in his head. "Are you okay, Saki? Can you remember that?"

"I only get lost when there are a lot of forks. This one is pretty straightforward," I said sullenly, slightly offended that he considered my sense of direction to be that terrible.

"But we'll be running in complete darkness this time. If you don't remember the path perfectly, you might run into a corner or a wall."

"Can't one person hold the light? It shouldn't affect our running speed that much."

"No, we can't do that," Satoru said decisively.

He seemed to have automatically assumed command now that Kiroumaru was gone.

"We'll be running at pretty much the same pace, but the fiend won't. If we light the way, then it'll be able to chase us at full speed. But in the dark, we'll be much faster since we know the route."

"Wouldn't the fiend come with a light?"

"That would be even better. We can put it out and it'll have an even harder time adjusting to the darkness."

"Then it might get too cautious and decide not to come after us at all."

It probably knew we couldn't use cantus on it. So it would come after us without fear of being attacked. Still, being in complete darkness might make it a little more cautious.

"I guess you're right. If it decides to give up before getting in the tunnel, the plan would fall apart. …let's do it this way. You run ahead with a small light. I'll rely on that to follow you. The fiend will come after us with its own light, so it'll be going fast."

So in other words, we were going to play tag on hard mode.

"But come to think of it, this isn't a bad situation. It'll be easy to tell how far away the fiend is. …we just have to keep a safe distance and lead it to Screen Rock."

Screen Rock was where we decided was the best place to use the psychobuster. It was at the end of a path near a thin slab of rock that looked like a folding screen. We would hide behind it to wait for the fiend. Once it got close enough, we'd break open the psychobuster.

The problem was what would happen after. The psychobuster would kill the fiend days later, but wouldn't knock it out then and there. For a few hours at least, it would be able to move around as usual.

We'd have to do a hit-and-run.

"…wouldn't it be better for me to carry the cross? Both your arms are injured."

Satoru seemed to read my mind.

"They're fine. Besides I've always had better aim than you."

"But…"

"Think about it this way. Since you're running ahead, I'll get infected too if you break open the psychobuster."

"That won't happen though, since I'd be waiting for you to get to Screen Rock before I use it."

"No, I should carry it. If you accidentally trip and break it open, we're screwed."

He was trying to joke about it, but I could tell that if worse came to worst, if the fiend caught up to him, he intended to take it down with him.

The rain continued to fall. Here and there, water had completely soaked through the rocks and ran across the floor in little streams. The air was heavy and sticky.

"Can we really do it?" I said quietly.

Satoru looked questioningly at me.

"Can we really…kill another human?"

"Stop!" he said sharply. "Don't think about it. All we're doing is breaking open the cross in front of the fiend. It won't die immediately."

He was wording it differently because he couldn't do it with the mindset that he was committing a crime.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up."

"It's fine. …we're just doing what we have to do. Don't think any more than that."

"Yeah. …but-"

I had to tell him about it now. I felt that if I didn't say it now, it would be too late.

"Is Maria and Mamoru's child really a fiend?"

"We're going back to this topic again?" Satoru said, sounding impatient. "You've seen what it did. It killed people indiscriminately. Isn't that what fiends do?"

"I know that. But it just seems fundamentally different from all the fiends that have appeared before."

"…well they're probably all different to some degree. There are a couple of types of fiends, right? But who cares if it's different? We'll…stop it first, then figure it out."

"I simply don't think it's a fiend."

Satoru stood up and ran his hand through his hair.

"Cut it out! Why do you keep saying things that make me doubt myself?"

"Sorry! But listen. I can't help wondering whether the child knows what it is."

"So what if it doesn't? We have to stop it either way. If we don't, the town will be destroyed and all of Japan will fall under Yakomaru's control. The number of fiends will grow and eventually queerats will take over the world."

"I know. I know we have to stop it at all costs. But it's Maria's child. I want to give it a chance. Just one."

"A chance? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"If we can somehow make it recognize…!"

I explained my plan. He was the only one who could do it.

"Are you serious? It might not do anything."

"Isn't it worth trying just once? We should have a chance right before we use the psychobuster."

Satoru crossed his arms and considered it.

"…I can't promise anything."

That was the most I could get out of him.

"I'll give it a shot if there's time. But we're not putting the original plan in jeopardy. If it looks to be impossible, use the psychobuster."

"Alright. I know you're right. Thank you," I said earnestly. "I really mean it, and I can't say it enough."

"I understand…how you feel," Satoru said, then went quiet.

It seemed like he didn't want to get into the subject.

There came a clanging sound, like metal hitting stone, from far away. I jumped in surprise.

"That sound…!" I shouted.

Satoru put his finger to his lips.

I heard it again. It seemed to be traveling on some convoluted path to get to us. Part of it echoed down the tunnel while another part seemed to be coming directly through the rock.

"It's them. The troops aboveground are communicating with the ones down here."

They were starting the chase. Kiroumaru was the prey.

The next moment, I heard a different sound. A long, distinctive howl like a wolf's.

"Kiroumaru!" Satoru shouted.

They were getting close already. That was the signal that the fiend had fallen for the bait.

"They're coming. Let's get in the tunnel. …we have two, maybe three minutes."

I moved into place, twisting a bundle of tree roots together and lighting it to make a torch. The first moment was crucial. The fiend needed to get a clear glimpse of us.

My heart was pounding so hard it made my hands shake. Cold sweat broke out all over my body. The fiend was going to appear any time now. Failure was not an option. Not only our lives, but the lives of millions of others were at stake.

I felt dizzy and nauseated. My head began to throb with pain.

And then it happened.

My thoughts became surprisingly clear. I felt my mind opening up to everything, like I was no longer just myself. It was a strange, but not unpleasant sensation. I felt an almost overwhelming joy, that could almost be described as the moment of sexual climax. That was it. I was sure. Shun was whispering in my ear, in my thoughts.

I could clearly see all my feelings of indirection, uneasiness, and doubt as if through someone else's eyes.

My doubts about Kiroumaru were still there, but I could now see that the root of these feelings were coming from somewhere else.

"The enemy believes they are hunting us, and in their focused pursuit they will not realize until the end that they have become the hunted."

Kiroumaru's words echoed in my ears. He was talking about the enemy, but couldn't it apply to us too?

I had heard the same thing before. When they were teaching us to play Go at Harmony School.

Trapped by the thought of trapping… When you're concentrating too hard on trying to take your opponent's pieces, you open yourself up to have your pieces taken.

Why was this saying stuck in my head?

Yakomaru… Back when we still called him Squealer, he had said he learned battle strategies from reading a Go book.

I couldn't imagine that someone that crafty hadn't already guess our plans. After being outsmarted by Kiroumaru earlier, would he risk exposing the fiend, his trump card, to danger?

That wasn't all either. Had Yakomaru really not anticipated losing his soldiers in that attack? His cool disregard for his subordinates' lives was characteristic of his fighting style.

If he had us dancing in the palm of his hand this whole time…

I started sweating again.

But we couldn't back out now.

Kiroumaru burst out of the tunnel ahead. We locked eyes for a moment, then he quickly disappeared down another tunnel.

"It's coming…!" Satoru said in a low voice.

Suddenly, the image of fear itself appeared.

4

From the same tunnel came a number of black-clad forms.

Queerat soldiers. They were naked; each wore a leather bag of some sort and held a blowgun made to be used in small spaces like these tunnels.

They seemed to catch our scent. They quickly spread out and put the blowguns to their mouths. Only one in four held a torch, though I don't know whether it was because they had good night vision or because they didn't need to rely on sight at all.

Then another figure appeared. It was too dark to make out the face, but I guessed it was either Yakomaru or the fiend.

It came toward us, showing no sign of fear. The only thing that distinguished it from the other soldiers was the hooded cloak it wore despite the heat and humidity. It walked forward, looking around at its surroundings.

The soldiers appeared to have found the tunnel Kiroumaru disappeared into. They turned their attention back to us. The hooded figure bent forward slightly and the light illuminated its hair. In the firelight, it was blood-red…

The fiend.

Satoru and I snapped the necks of the two soldiers nearest us. They dropped without even having time to scream. The other two didn't seem to comprehend exactly what had happened, but fled down the nearest tunnel in panic anyway.

Now only the hooded figure was left. It slowly raised its head to look at us.

We turned and ran down the tunnel.

I wasn't sure if the fiend had gotten a good look at us. But in any case, two soldiers killed by cantus ought to be enough of a provocation.

The fiend should be coming after us. We stopped around a bend about twenty meters into the tunnel. I lit a small bundle of roots, held my breath, and waited.

From the tunnel entrance came a shadow of a figure holding a torch. The hooded silhouette of a little god of death.

That was the signal to begin our race against death. We took off at full speed.

There was no time to spare even a glance backwards. We just kept running as fast as we could.

The fiend had the luxury of setting its own pace, but all we could do was run for our lives without even being able to think about how we could conserve stamina. Once it matched our pace, all it had to do was speed up at any time, and we would be done for if we took even a second to look back.

As we had planned, I ran ahead with Satoru following close behind. Although my legs felt weak with fear, I pushed myself harder, feet slapping the ground as I flew around the bends.

I kept running. Don't think. Any thought that came to my head was trampled under my feet. If I tripped over a pebble or a crack in the floor, our lives would come to a very quick end.

I thought my heart would burst as the fiend slowly gained on us.

We at least had to keep one bend between us and the fiend so that it wouldn't be able to see us.

The fiend wouldn't attack recklessly with cantus, since it might end up burying itself alive if it brought the entire tunnel down. Even if that didn't happen, it might accidentally block the path between us.

As I thought about the breeze blowing our scent toward the fiend, the ground beneath me suddenly felt soft and insubstantial. Even now, I still don't know how I managed to keep my balance and keep going.

"Saki! Saki! It's okay. Slow down!" Satoru shouted. "It's taking its time."

Of course. It had nothing to worry about. All it needed to do was wait for us to wear ourselves out.

I slowed my breakneck pace. The fiend's torchlight stopped just beyond the bend and did not come closer. But I could still hear quiet steps. They were the quick, even steps of someone walking briskly, but not running.

We slowed down as well, alternating between a quick walk and running, trying to catch our breath. I was already breathing hard from the run earlier.

There were still the sounds of metal against rock coming from behind. More than before. I wonder what messages they were sending. We had no idea at the time.

"This is alright, let's keep this pace," Satoru said, struggling to force himself to breath normally. "They're probably trying to intimidate us. But if we can enlarge the gap between us, that would be good. Anyway, the scariest part is over."

"…is this alright?"

"Yeah. Try to get your breathing back to normal before we reach Screen rock. You go on ahead. I'll stay as long as I can to keep an eye on it. If it starts speeding up, I'll shout."

"Okay."

The vague feeling of unease returned. But I followed Satoru's instructions anyway, telling myself it was just my imagination. Everything was going according to plan.

Now that I had time to think, all sorts of stuff started flooding my mind.

Was Kiroumaru in league with the enemy? Was everything part of Yakomaru's plan? I tried not to think about it. The dice had been cast. Everything would be decided in a few minutes. There was no use worrying about it now.

Strangely enough, the next thing that came to mind was a creation myth we had learned at Harmony School long ago.

After Izanami died from the burn wounds she received during childbirth, Izanagi wanted to see his wife so terribly that he made his way to the underworld. Even though Izanami told him never to look upon her, he could not help but do so. What he saw was a terrible, rotting corpse filled with maggots.

Izanagi was so frightened that he fled back to the world above. Embarrassed, Izanami sent the hag of the underworld to chase after him.

Of course, I didn't just happen to remember this story as I was running for my life. I saw it almost like a vision, lighting up the tunnel in vivid colors. It was possible that my mind was so full of fear that it reawakened my memory of this story.

Chased by the hag, Izanagi barely got away by using his hair comb as a distraction.

But we were a good distance away from the fiend now. So…

It's strange.

A voice spoke.

Shun… Is it Shun, I asked myself.

It's strange. Don't you think so?

The quiet voice persisted.

Strange? What is?

Don't you hear it?

Again, I heard the metallic banging of the enemies communicating through the rock. It wasn't just coming from one place. The message was being sent from multiple locations simultaneously. But what about it?

Careful. It's a trap.

I could clearly recognize Shun's voice now.

Stop, Saki.

"Stop? Why? We can't!" I cried aloud without realizing it.

Haven't you noticed? The fiend hasn't been coming after you.

I slowed, sped up again, then stopped.

"Saki! What are you doing? Hurry and go!" Satoru shouted from behind.

"Satoru, it's a trap!"

"What are you talking about? Are you seeing things? You've been muttering to yourself this whole time."

He pushed me from behind.

"Wait. The fiend isn't chasing us at all, why?"

Satoru looked behind him, surprised.

"It's probably walking. If we stay here, it's going to catch up soon!"

"But do you hear any footsteps? All I've been hearing is the sound of rain and the enemy sending messages through the rocks."

"You're right. …but still, we can't go anywhere but forward. There's only one exit to the tunnel."

"But, wait. What if it…"

I shoved Satoru with all my strength. And saved both of our lives by a hair.

The part of the tunnel we had just about to walk toward suddenly collapsed with a deafening rumble.

Boulders and water came crashing down and were swept right at us.

"Run!"

We turned and started running the way we had come. But wouldn't the fiend be waiting? We had been driven into a corner. Satoru lifted the cross from his neck and gripped it tightly. If the fiend killed him, it was going down as well.

Forty, fifty meters back into the tunnel and the fiend was still nowhere to be seen.

"Where did it go?" Satoru stopped and whispered, his voice shaking.

I turned and looked down the tunnel. Rubble seemed to have stopped falling. Thanks to the moisture in the air, the dust had already begun to settle. A faint light came in from above; it appeared the collapse reached all the way up to the surface.

"Let's go back."

"Which back?"

"Back to where we started…downwind," I said.

Satoru seemed uncertain.

"Isn't the fiend there?"

"It shouldn't be."

I was still in the grip of fear, but my mind was becoming clearer.

"Don't you get it? This is a trap. Yakomaru predicted where we would go and caused the collapse."

"So Kiroumaru is in on it?"

"I'm not sure about that… Anyway, it's suicide to keep going. They'll be waiting."

"But the fiend is back this way," Satoru said, looking frightened. "So we should keep going forward. The collapsed part leads all the way aboveground; maybe we can get away from there."

"No! Think about it. How do you think they brought down all this rock?"

Satoru went pale.

"It wasn't explosives. We didn't smell gunpowder or sulfur, and there wasn't the sound of an explosion. The tunnel just collapsed. …but, that's impossible."

At that moment, my eye caught something on the floor of the tunnel. Satoru followed my gaze.

It was a wig made of red hair.

"Son of a bitch! We've been tricked from the start," he groaned.

We had been playing right into Yakomaru's hands.

Thinking back, it was strange that the fiend would be wearing a cloak. First, it was hot inside the tunnel, and second, wearing a cloak made the fiend difficult to distinguish from a queerat, meaning we might have killed it on accident. Of course, we would have died from death feedback too, but since the fiend was the enemy's only trump card, they wouldn't have risked it.

It wasn't the fiend. They had cut the fiend's hair and made one of the soldiers dress up as it to chase us down the tunnel. The aboveground troops were kept informed of our location through messages sent through the rocks. That way they could collapse the tunnel without the danger of accidentally burying themselves at the same time.

That means the ones lying in wait were…

"Run!" I shouted.

Satoru just stared blankly over my shoulder.

From the settling cloud of dust came the light of a torch and the silhouette of a child…

We took off at lightning speed.

I heard the sound of running behind us. There was no time for the chase, victory would have to be decided right now. There was only one bend left between us and the fiend. Once we hit the straight part of the tunnel, it would have a clear shot at us.

An idea suddenly came to me. I reached out with my right hand and grabbed the backpack Satoru was wearing.

"Saki, what are you doing?" he yelled.

I felt around, grabbed the fake false minoshiro and tossed it behind me, feeling like Izanagi throwing his hair comb at the hag.

The fake false minoshiro, sensing danger, heaved its many legs and began climbing up the wall like a roach.

Not a moment after we had rounded the next bend, a blinding light burst behind us. The fake false minoshiro was using its defensive light to disorient the fiend.

Just as I was wondering how long the rainbow-colored light would last, it was snuffed out like a candle. I had no idea what the fate of the fake false minoshiro was, but at least it had stopped the fiend for a short while. In that time, we had managed to run through the straight part of the tunnel. If it wasn't for those few seconds, we would have died already.

I had thought we put a good distance between us, but the footsteps behind us started up again. It was faster than I imagined. I guess its small size made it easy to maneuver in the narrow tunnels.

Still, even though we were running desperately for our lives, we had an advantage. We'd been through this tunnel a number of times, and knew where all the turns and obstacles were.

Thanks to that, we were able to keep the distance between us and the fiend for the moment.

I was starting to wheeze and my lungs felt like they were on fire. My endurance was reaching its limit. Fear was sapping my strength.

The worst thing about the situation was that we were running downwind, opposite of our original plan. Even if we both died using the psychobuster, there was a good chance that the fiend, being upwind, would not be infected.

Suddenly, Satoru stopped. I passed him, and turned around.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm going to try your plan."

Behind him, the air started shimmering and a gauzy screen appeared, blocking the light and leaving me in darkness.

Less than two seconds later, the fiend appeared. Its torch shone through the screen so I was able to see it, but from its perspective, the light was reflecting off of a giant mirror.

It halted, holding the torch high and observing the mirror suspiciously. It was wearing a loose straw trousers and boots, looking like nothing more than a normal child.

If only it would realize that.

I had explained my plan to Satoru. Since it had been raised by queerats, it probably thought of itself as a queerat as well. What would happen if we put a mirror in front of it? We had never seen a mirror in a queerat colony, since they didn't have a habit of using them. It had probably seen reflections of itself in water, but might not have ever realized that it was different from everyone else.

Once it realized that it looked like its enemies, in other words, human, would it question its own identity? And if it did, it might awaken its death feedback.

Are you sure? It might not have any effect at all.

That's what Satoru had said. But now he was risking his life to do what I had asked.

"Saki, leave this to me and go," he whispered.

"No."

I had no intention of going anywhere. I didn't want to run anymore. Moreover, I didn't want to abandon him. In any case, if this idea failed, there would be no point in running.

The fiend…Maria's son slowly approached the mirror. I couldn't see his expression, but his body language was clearly one of confusion.

"…that's right. Look closely. You're human. Same as us," Satoru said quietly.

As if in response, the fiend started speaking.

"Grrrrr…ΠΥ ガ Ш▼Ё◎⊿⁉"

"ΠΥ ガ Ш▼Ё◎⊿⁉"

"ΠΥ ガ Ш▼Ё◎⊿⁉"

He was repeating the same word over and over. He cocked his head, and just when I thought he was going to recognize what he was, he started howling in a piercing, high-pitched voice.

"ギ★＊∀§▲ЖΑД ヲヱ!"

The wall beside him cracked.

"Watch out! Run!" I shouted, ducking down.

Satoru was just a moment too slow.

The wall broke into chunks of rock and came flying through the air. They passed through the mirror and over our heads. One of them hit Satoru squarely on the temple.

He pitched forward, but managed to stay standing through sheer force of will.

I looked up and gasped.

The mirror had dissipated.

I was about fifteen meters away from Satoru, and Satoru was ten meters away from the fiend.

Satoru stood completely still, blood dripping from his head. We were like frogs frozen by the stare of a snake.

The fiend walked unconcernedly toward us, knowing full well that we couldn't do anything to it. Under the messily cut hair was a face as beautiful as an angel, but its eyes gleamed with the cruel, hungry look of a cat hunting a mouse.

"Run, Saki," Satoru sad calmly.

Just as I was wondering what he intended to do, the breeze in the tunnel slackened.

"Satoru?"

He didn't have the skill to reverse the wind in such a narrow tunnel. But with immense effort, he managed to stop the breeze for the moment.

"I'm ending it here."

"No…stop!" I screamed, realizing what he was about to do.

The fiend was only five meters away.

"Here, catch!" he said, holding up the cross and hurling it at the fiend.

Suddenly time seemed to stretch indefinitely.

Everything looked like it was being replayed in slow motion. I could see the movement of the cross as clearly as if they were individual photographs.

The cross fell to the ground and broke open. A plume of grayish-white powder burst from it, slowly expanding outward…

Ah, so this was the end, I thought. We were about to fulfill our mission. Regardless of what happened to us, at least the fiend would be destroyed. Kamisu 66 would be saved and peace would be returned…

No. That was a lie. I couldn't let it happen.

At this distance, Satoru would be infected by the psychobuster as well.

A maddening thought took over the logical parts of my mind.

One by one, I've lost my loved ones. My sister. Shun. Maria and Mamoru…

If I lost Satoru too, I'll be all alone. I would be the only left from team one. Was that really the will of the gods?

No! I screamed silently to myself.

As the white powder swirled slowly through the air like paint dropped into water, it sparked and blossomed into flames.

The flames spread rapidly, greedily licking up every spore. The anti-PK weapon that had survived for over a millennium was destroyed in the cleansing fire…

Time returned to normal and everything started happening at once.

Satoru fell to the ground, dumbfounded.

And the fiend…

It shrieked and staggered away. The fire seemed to have injured it somewhere.

"Satoru! Run!"

I pulled him up by the arm.

"Saki, what…?" he murmured, still unable to process what had happened.

"Forget about it and run!"

As we turned, a frightening roar rang out behind us.

Glancing back, I saw the fiend glaring at us with a look of rage. It hair had been burnt, and both hands were red and raw.

This was really the end.

Numb with fear, I simply stared at the fiend.

I had no doubt that my life was about to end.

Because of my impulsive action, all our efforts until now, and all the people whose lives were sacrificed for our cause, were for naught. We couldn't kill the fiend, and now we were going to die in this hell…

I had already accepted death. That's why I couldn't immediately comprehend what happened next.

A rock came shooting through the air from behind, almost hitting the fiend before it was blocked by cantus. For some reason, the fiend backed away with an expression of fear on his face.

Kiroumaru came running out of the darkness.

"This way!" he shouted, grabbing us by the collars and turning away from the fiend.

Time hung suspended. As the three of us ran, our backs were completely open, and the fiend could easily have burned us all. Amazingly, nothing happened.

As we rounded the corner, I slowly began to comprehend how miraculous our rescue had been.

Still, it wasn't over yet. The god of death was quickly descending upon us.

But now we were stuck between a rock and a hard place.

We had narrowly avoided death, but had also lost the chance to defeat the fiend.

We ran desperately through the tunnel.

"It doesn't appear the fiend is following," Kiroumaru said, sniffing the air.

Now that the fiend was upwind, we would know immediately if it got near.

"It appears he was burned quite badly. He might be treating his wounds first," Satoru said faintly.

His head was still bleeding.

We slowed to a walk.

"Where are we going now?" I asked.

"I don't know." Kiroumaru looked troubled. "Let's just put some distance between us and the fiend for now."

"I'm sorry, it's my fault the psychobuster…"

"There's no time to lament that. Concentrate on the path ahead. Yakomaru's soldiers might be lying in ambush."

We made it most of the way back without encountering anyone. My spirits lifted as I thought that this was only natural. The enemy had used its trump card, the fiend, but we had left him behind. Being the smart tactician that he was, Yakomaru would never choose to fight humans with queerats…

But as we neared the mouth of the tunnel, Kiroumaru suddenly stopped. Since we were upwind, we weren't able to tell who was coming. But Kiroumaru's sensitive hearing seemed to have picked up something. The enemy appeared to be hiding nearby.

He raised his hand to stop us. As we slowly backed away, there came the sound of rapid gunfire and bits of rock exploded from the walls.

We backed twenty or thirty meters down the tunnel. Then came the second wave of gunfire. This time, the bullets came deeper into the tunnel.

Since we couldn't see them, we couldn't counterattack. And if we tried to get a glimpse of them, we might be shot. If we just attacked blindly, we risked bringing down the entire tunnel and burying ourselves alive.

Just as we had thought we were safe, we were driven into another corner. This time, there was no way out.

When the third wave of bullets came, I knew that the enemy was just firing blind. But there was still the chance of getting hit by a stray bullet, so we retreated down one of the side tunnels that led to a dead end.

There was a sharp whistling sound inside the main tunnel. Yakomaru was probably communicating with the fiend.

"…I smell the fiend. He's coming," Kiroumaru said casually, as if the fiend was a friend coming for a visit. "There's a burnt smell, as well as the smell of blood. I also smell fear in his sweat. He's moving very carefully, possibly because of his wounds. And at the moment he's stopped about thirty or forty meters away, probably trying to get a good look at us. Somehow, he knows we're here."

Why didn't he slaughter us all in one go?

"This is it," Satoru said, sitting down with his head in his hands. "There's nowhere to go. We've lost our trump card. Now we're…"

I felt a sharp stab of guilt for wasting the psychobuster, but Kiroumaru seemed to think differently.

"It might be too early to give up."

"Why? Do you have an idea?" I asked, clutching desperately to the tiniest shred of hope.

"No. I don't think there is a way out. …however, Yakomaru does not seem to have an immediate solution for this either."

He seemed to have the answer to the question I had earlier.

"But they have nothing to worry about. They've got an overwhelming advantage. In fact, they can just wait for us to kill ourselves," Satoru said.

"No, that is not the inevitable end," Kiroumaru explained calmly. "We still have our last resort. If you can accept being buried along with the enemy, you can collapse the cave with your cantus."

"Is that Yakomaru's fear? Is that why he's not attacking us?"

If that was it, then all we could do was hope that the collapse would be big enough to kill everyone.

"That may be one reason. Even though he has the advantage right now, he might be having trouble coming up with the final move. His soldiers won't enter the tunnel because of your cantus, and the fiend is probably also hesitant to come alone."

"Why?"

"One reason might be because I'm here. Even though I have no cantus, I would not hesitate to attack him. …and he might also be having other doubts."

"Like what?"

"The fiend was badly burned. He had overestimated the protection afforded to him by having cantus, and now might be having doubts about his powers."

"In that case…" Satoru looked up. "Saki burning the psychobuster was a way of attacking the fiend. How was she able to do that?"

"Because…" I thought for a moment. "Probably because when I burned the psychobuster, my goal to save Satoru also included saving the fiend. If I'm trying to save someone, but they get hurt in the process, I'm not attacking them intentionally."

"I see…" he said quietly. "Can we use that to our advantage? If we make it seem like we're trying to save him, we could use our cantus…"

"It won't work," I said, shaking my head. "You can't do it if you've already had the idea of attacking. It would never work. …you can't deceive yourself into bypassing attack inhibition or death feedback."

If it was that easy, we wouldn't have had to descend into this hell to find the psychobuster.

Suddenly, Yakomaru's voice came from outside the tunnel.

"Let us negotiate! I am the supreme commander of the Robber Fly colony, Yakomaru. Shall we try to avoid any more unnecessary bloodshed?"

"What kind of bullshit is he trying to pull now?" Satoru muttered angrily. "Who was the one who attacked and killed hundreds of innocent people for no reason?"

"Please answer me. Humans and queerats may be different, but we are of equal intelligence. Our interests may differ, but surely negotiations can overcome them. Engaging in dialogue would be the first step."

"Don't answer," Kiroumaru warned. "He wants to use our voices to locate us."

"…if this continues, it will only lead to more deaths," Yakomaru continued. "That is not my intention. I swear upon my own name. If you surrender now, I promise to spare your lives and to treat you humanely in your capture."

"That's like a haythatcher promising other birds that it won't eat their eggs even if they lay them in its nest," Kiroumaru scoffed. "That double-tongued bastard doesn't really think he can win us over with his words. He's just trying to get us to respond."

Once he realized he wasn't going to get anything from us, Yakomaru's voice stopped abruptly.

We waited for the attack to come.

The silence was stifling.

"Satoru… I'm sorry. I was stupid. I thought that you would be infected by the psychobuster too. But…"

"It's fine. I understand," Satoru said distractedly. "The fiend probably would have been infected, but he would have killed me before I was infected. …so you've saved me, in a sense."

"…in the end, it's all going as you said," I said ruefully to Kiroumaru. "I ruined our chance to deal with the fiend. I'm going to die regretting it."

"There's a saying we have that goes, 'Complain to the grave worms when you are lying next to them'," Kiroumaru said, his eye glittering. "You are too fond of giving up. Our kind seeks to turn the tables until our dying breath. Though those efforts may be in vain, we lose nothing by trying. This attitude isn't limited to soldiers, but should apply to all living beings."

I should have been impressed at his will in the face of all the odds. But at the moment, I thought his words were mere bravado.

We had exhausted all our options and were soon to be buried deep beneath the earth. What plan could he possibly have?

"Kiroumaru, there's something I want to ask you." Satoru looked up.

"What is it?"

"We've fallen squarely into Yakomaru's trap. When it happened, I honestly thought you had betrayed us."

"I see. It's not surprising to think that when you've had a severe mental shock. You would like reassurance that I haven't deceived you," Kiroumaru said calmly. "If you think about it, there's no reason I would. First, betraying you two would mean working with that bastard, and I have no motivation to do so. My goal for living now is to rescue the queen, and destroy Yakomaru. Second, if I was working for the enemy, I would have killed you long ago. When you split up, that would have been the perfect opportunity. I could have done it in the blink of an eye."

"Yeah, you have a point."

I looked Kiroumaru squarely in the face. No matter how many times I did it, I still couldn't help suppressing a shudder.

"You risked your life to save us from the fiend. To doubt you even after you've done that… But I want to ask something too."

"I will answer as long as I have the breath to do so."

"You said you came to Tokyo years ago with your soldiers, and your knowledge of the area proves that. But why did you come? What was so important that you would risk losing a third of your men?"

Kiroumaru's mouth split into a wide grin. "I see. That is the root of all your misgivings about me. I had not wanted to tell you before, but there's no reason to hide it now."

He stood up, sniffing the air and twitching his ears to make sure the enemy had not moved.

"We came for the very same reasons we are here now. We wanted to find weapons of mass destruction left behind by the ancient civilization."

"…what for?"

His smile faded. "What for? Not to add to our hobby collection. To use. The psychobuster might not have enough power, but with nuclear weapons, we might have been able to replace humans as the dominant species on the planet."

"Why? Doesn't the Giant Hornet colony have good relations with humans? And yet you're just like Yakomaru in your desire to dominate," Satoru said disbelievingly.

"First of all, please look at it from our perspective. Every creature wants to live and reproduce. For us, our entire life revolves around the continuation of our colony. So we needed a way to ensure our survival. The Giant Hornets are allied with many other colonies, but we still have enemies, and the need to go to war can arise at any moment," Kiroumaru explained. "In the same vein, it's easy to imagine that the existence of humans is a huge threat to our colony. What exactly are 'good relations'? By being loyal, obeying your every whim, and doing your dirty work, we are allowed to live. But all that can change in an instant. It's not unusual for entire colonies to be annihilated for no discernible reason."

"So you wanted to kill humans before they could kill you?"

"If our victory could be guaranteed simply through a preemptive attack, we would have done so. Like what Yakomaru has done. But since we did not find any nuclear weapons, we naturally had to abandon the idea."

"But how did you know about the nuclear weapons to begin with?"

"You've probably already guessed. The library terminals you call false minoshiro or fake false minoshiro. We've known for a long time that knowledge is power, so we put forth a lot of effort to catch one. The terminals have long since evolved defenses to make them accessible only to humans, and recently a new type has appeared that are even harder to capture. …unfortunately, the one in our colony was taken by Yakomaru and now he has at least four terminals in his possession."

We had relied too heavily on the absolute power of cantus. In every era, those in power inevitably fall because of arrogance and neglect.

"Thank you for answering honestly. But do you think we can still trust you after what you've said?"

"Of course. You have no choice, and because of that I have not hidden anything from you," he said matter-of-factly. "Although we view humans as our enemies, we have no desire to dominate them. All we want is for our colonies to thrive. But now, the Robber Fly colony has threatened our continued existence by imprisoning our queen."

Kiroumaru's eye glittered with hatred as he spoke.

"That bastard has lost the basic instinct to live and die for the colony and turned into a power-hungry monster. Under the guise of democracy, he spreads his treacherous ideals and attempts to consolidate all power under himself," he said, a gutteral growl entering his voice.

Dropping his voice, he continued, "Although our kind is made to serve humans, we have always been allowed to have our own traditions and culture. However, if Yakomaru becomes dictator, that will be the end of us. We cannot let him create a society where queens are lobotomized and turned into slaves."

I remembered the horrors I had seen in the "farmhouses" in the Robber Fly colony. For the first time, I felt a sort of empathy toward Kiroumaru that transcended our species.

"…so I must kill the fiend through any means possible and stop Yakomaru's treacherous plans. On that point, I believe we are in complete agreement."

"Yes." I nodded.

"Yeah, I agree too, but…"

Satoru didn't continue, but his meaning was clear. We could trust Kiroumaru, but that didn't help our current situation in the least.

There was nothing we could do. All of us believed that, even Kiroumaru. Yakomaru must be thinking the same thing.

But that wasn't the case. If we had realized that, we might have been able to win without further bloodshed.

However, none of us could have imagined that we actually had an overwhelming advantage at the time.

…strange.

That voice in my head again.

Shun? What do you mean, strange?

In order not to arouse Satoru and Kiroumaru's notice, I asked the question silently in my mind.

It's Kiroumaru. He's the joker…or rather, the trump card.

I don't know what you mean. Explain it to me.

I told you before. That's not a fiend. Think about it…

Shun's voice faded away into the distance.

Shun. Shun! Why? Tell me.

…you know…I showed you…aboveground…my…

Then there was only silence.

I still didn't understand.

"Saki, what's wrong?" Satoru asked, seeing the expression on my face.

Just as I was about to explain what Shun had revealed, Kiroumaru spoke.

"He's coming…the fiend."

We all looked toward the entrance with bated breath. The dead end we were in was around a large bend so we couldn't see the main tunnel.

"He's walking slowly to keep quiet. He's probably close; another two or three meters…"

Had the fiend really found us? If it came down toward the dead end, we would have nowhere to run. I started concentrating in preparation for collapsing the tunnel. But this wasn't only suicide, it was also an intentional attack on another human. At the last second, attack inhibition would probably prevent me from doing anything.

Would it be better to do it now, before I saw the fiend?

I looked up at the ceiling. …and couldn't do it. A wave of despair washed over me.

If I brought down the tunnel, it would kill Satoru as well. As I expected, I still couldn't use cantus.

I closed my eyes and waited for the end to come.

Kiroumaru whispered calmly, "He's passed by. He's probably on his way to rejoin Yakomaru."

My heart began to beat again and sweat broke out all over my body.

"Why is he joining them?" Satoru asked, sighing with relief as he spoke.

"Yakomaru's probably afraid that we'll stake everything on an attack against him and his soldiers. Guns are useless against cantus, so just one of you could kill their entire army." Kiroumaru cocked his head. "But now they've lost the ability to attack us from both sides, and left us with an escape route. It's like he's inviting us to run…"

"Even if it is a trap, we should still go. There may be more troops waiting for us, but we won't get another chance to run," Satoru said, starting back toward the main tunnel.

"Wait!" I shouted.

I understood. What Shun had been trying to tell me suddenly clicked.

He wasn't a fiend. If he really had Raman-Klogius syndrome, it would be just like Tomiko had described, and we wouldn't be able to raise a hand to him at all.

But he wasn't a fiend. That meant…

"Saki?" Satoru said, looking incredulously at me.

"We're so blind. We've had so many perfect opportunities this whole time, and we've just let them slip through our fingers."

"What do you mean?" Kiroumaru asked.

"But there still might be a chance. It'll be harder than before… …but, what if it's the other way around? If only we could use it against them…"

"Saki, just explain it to us already!" Satoru blurted out, unable to wait any longer.
"There's just one way to kill the fiend…!"

5

"I've always wondered about that. Why would Maria's child, of all people, be a fiend?" I licked my lips, trying to sort out the thoughts in my head. "The chance of giving birth to a fiend are extremely small. And for the first child the queerats capture to be a fiend, that probability is astronomically low."

"…but couldn't they have done something to the child? Like give him their psychotropic drug?"

"That's probably what everyone would assume. But this was Yakomaru's first time raising a human child. Do you think that a drug that had never been tested on humans before would have let Yakomaru manipulate him exactly the way he wanted to?"

"There are many types of drugs that we use," Kiroumaru cut in. "Our ancestors, the naked mole rats, consumed a substance extracted from their queens' urine to control their workers. Although our queen still possesses the ability to produce the substance, our mental capacities are far beyond mole rats, and it is impossible to fully control soldiers without adding other drugs such as marijuana to eradicate their fear. …but you are right that since we are different species, it is hard to imagine that our drugs would be able to turn off attack inhibition and create a fiend on demand."

"Then, if he's not a fiend, then what is he?" Satoru sounded bewildered.

The wound on his head was still bleeding, and looked extremely painful.

"…I mean, no matter how I think about it, he has to be a fiend. You've seen what he's done!"

"That's exactly what has blinded us this entire time."

As I said that, the logic of the situation fell into place.

"Letting us see the child kill humans without batting an eye was designed to be an emotional attack that would overwhelm our rational side and cause us to leap to conclusions. Only once we decided that he was a fiend could we feel marginally safer."

"Safer? What are you talking about? How would knowing he's a fiend make you safer?"

"Raman-Klogius syndrome is at least something we know exists. Humans are more afraid of the unknown than anything else."

Satoru crossed his arms and thought.

"I have good reasons for saying he's not a fiend. Fiends completely lose the ability to think rationally, and simply kill everything around them. If the child really is a fiend, how come he hasn't hurt Yakomaru?"

"…couldn't they control him with drugs?"

"That's impossible. You can't tame a fiend. If it were possible, we would have done it ages ago and prevented all the attacks in the past, or at least brought the casualties down to a minimum. Also, if his mind is being influenced by drugs, you couldn't be sure that he'd be able to attack and kill people."

"Well then why doesn't he have attack inhibition and death feedback?" Satoru asked.

"He probably does."

"What are you talking about?"

"What's the simplest answer? The child has been separated since he was born and raised by queerats. So it would view itself as a queerat, not as a human."

"That might be true, but how…".

Realization dawned on his face.

"Maybe, you mean, the fiend…the child's attack inhibition works on queerats instead of humans?"

"Exactly."

The swirl of thoughts in my head turned into firm conviction. The child thought of himself as a queerat, and therefore could not kill "his own kind". To him, humans were a different species.

"But still, why would it kill people so viciously and indiscriminately?"

"Well, we kill them without a second thought as well, don't we?"

"Huh?" Satoru said, looking shocked. "But they're queerats."

He became aware that Kiroumaru was still listening.

"…I see. You're right. I never realized that's what we were doing."

Kiroumaru's eye widened. "I should have realized something was wrong earlier. When my elite troops were annihilated, he didn't kill them directly with cantus, but only took their weapons away. We were completely helpless and I thought that he was just having fun playing with us… but right after, when I encountered the fiend as I ran away, he didn't attack me even though there were only twenty or thirty meters between us. There's no way he didn't notice me." He let out a groan of frustration. "And earlier too. When the two of you were face to face with the fiend, I managed to intervene just by throwing a rock. Since killing you two is critical to their plan, I never expected that he would let you run away. Even getting rid of one of you would have been a minor victory, but again, the fiend just let us go. He wasn't choosing to not attack, he physically couldn't do it because I was there!"

"Wait, so if he's alone, then Kiroumaru can attack…?" Satoru's voice shook.

"Yes. He can't do anything to Kiroumaru. It would be easy to kill him, or capture him alive."

"Shit!" A crack appeared in the wall next to Satoru. "We had victory in our hands this entire time! But we let it slip away. Why didn't we think more carefully earlier?"

"Calm down, it's not too late yet," I said as calmly as I could. "We still figured it out, even if it was at the last possible moment."

"We should have figured it out before the fiend…before he passed by through the main tunnel. He's joined up with Yakomaru by now. Even if Kiroumaru goes in now, he'll still be killed," Satoru sighed.

But there was still another way. It was a slim chance, but not impossible. It was the only thing we could gamble on.

Still, I couldn't help but hesitate doing something so cruel. If the positions were reversed, Yakomaru definitely wouldn't hold back for a second. But part of me still resisted the plan. Whether it was humans or queerats, we were all living things with beating hearts and warm blood running through our bodies. As intelligent beings, we were capable of happiness, sadness, anger, contemplation… We weren't pawns to be thrown away for the sake of some greater game. After spending so much time with Kiroumaru, I felt this even more strongly.

Seeing that child reminded me so much of Maria and Mamoru I thought my heart would be ripped to shreds.

Yet he had attacked the village, destroyed our homes, and killed thousands of innocent people. An irresistible wave of hatred and desire for revenge washed over me.

But he wasn't a fiend.

He was innocent. His parents had been killed by queerats, then the queerats had raised him and commanded him to kill. He believed himself to be a queerat, so he didn't question it, and none of it weighed on his conscience. To him, humans were devils that enslaved them and had the power to kill them on a whim.

And not just that. He couldn't go against the queerats because of attack inhibition and death feedback, but the queerats could punish him however they wished.

In short, he was literally their slave.

What kind of life had he lived? My heart hurt thinking about the way the queerats must have treated him after Maria and Mamoru died.

And what would happen if we died here?

The surviving people in the towns would have no choice but to flee far away to escape being killed. With the child, Yakomaru would be able to fend off attacks from other districts. And in a decade, all the infants he had kidnapped would be old enough to use cantus. Then he would be unstoppable. Queerats would take over Japan.

There was no time to think of alternative plans.

I had to do it.

I'm sure Tomiko would have come to the same conclusion.

"Saki," Satoru said, looking up. "You said that what you did to the fiend earlier would only work once, right?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "You need to know where the enemy is in relation to you first."

Quietly, we crept back toward the main tunnel until we were four or five meters away from where it crossed the path we were on.

It was silent in the tunnel.

At my gesture, Satoru made a tiny mirror from the water vapor in the air, and slowly moved it until we could see the enemy.

There. As soon as we saw them, Satoru let the mirror dissipate, and we retreated back down the small tunnel.

Although I only saw it for a split-second, I knew where they all were. Outside the small tunnel, about twenty meters away, a group of five soldiers lay in wait. And five meters behind them was the child.

"The fiend…he didn't come this way just to meet up with Yakomaru. They're setting a trap," Satoru whispered. "If we try to make a run for it, we're done for."

"Positioning the soldiers ahead of the fiend is a good strategy," Kiroumaru added. "I can't penetrate the group on my own; the soldiers would swarm me if I tried. And once you guys show up behind me, the fiend would have an open shot at you."

"Did you see Yakomaru?"

"No… He is no doubt hiding far behind them all."

I had more or less expected that the fiend…the child would be protected by the queerats.

And on one hand, the fact that Yakomaru wasn't on the front lines was good news. That meant victory could be decided in an instant. If Yakomaru were there, he might see through our plan and counteract it. But since he's in the back, he wouldn't have time.

It was rare for Yakomaru to make a mistake like this. His confidence in the "fiend" was making him sloppy.

We needed to take advantage of this before he noticed.

And Kiroumaru would be our trump card.

"There's something I must ask of you," I said.

"I will do anything in my power. …is it a strategy to defeat them?"

I explained my plan.

Kiroumaru looked stunned, and was temporarily speechless.

"Is that possible…? How did you even think of it?" Satoru asked, looking just as shocked.

"Shun told me."

"Shun? Who…oh!"

It seemed like his memories had finally been unsealed.

Kiroumaru suddenly broke into a smile.

"Fantastic. You are a first class strategist. …I had thought we were completely out of luck; I can't believe the only solution left is this simple."

"Will you do it?"

"Of course. The problem now is how to hide my scent. I'm upwind, so the soldiers will smell me coming from a mile away."

"That's true…"

Looking around, I saw that there was a stream of water running down the wall of the tunnel. The rain seemed to be coming down as strongly as before, so there was no worry that we'd run out of water.

Kiroumaru carefully washed all the mud off of himself. Satoru took of his clothes.

"It would be best if we had guano, but this should work in a pinch," Kiroumaru said, sniffing himself.

"But it's still not enough. …Satoru, can you change the wind direction? Even just a few seconds will do."

He grimaced. "I have to make a mirror at the same time, but if it's only for a few seconds, I think I can manage."

A small smile appeared on his face. "It would have been easy for Shun to use two techniques at the same time …if we get out of here, I want to hear what you remember about him."

"Alright."

Satoru seemed to want to say more.

Kiroumaru was having a hard time with Satoru's clothes, so we went over to help. Their bodies were different, so it was impossible to get a good fit, but we managed to put everything on. Now all that was left was to cover his face.

"Oh, we can use this," Satoru said, undoing the bloody bandage on his arm.

As he peeled the bandage off, the wound started bleeding again, but it didn't look too serious.

"I see, this would help trick them as well. The fiend might think that your face was injured when the psychobuster exploded…"

Kiroumaru wound the cloth around his head.

"Now we're prepared. But before we go, may I make a request of the two of you?" Kiroumaru said formally, looking uncannily like a reanimated mummy.

"We'll see what we can do."

"Once this is over, I believe everyone in the village will call for the complete eradication of the queerat species. But please, spare the queen of the Giant Hornet colony. She is the life and hope of every member of our colony…she is our mother."

"Very well. I can promise you that."

"I promise as well. No matter what happens, I will not let your queen be killed. And your colony will be restored."

Although his face was hidden by bandages, I could sense that Kiroumaru was smiling.

"Now that I have your word, I no longer have any reservations. I can't wait to smash that smooth-talking bastard's wild delusions to smithereens."

We crept up to the intersection of our path and the main tunnel.

"So like we decided earlier, I'm going to count down from ten, and we'll start at zero. Then I'll start counting up by seconds. On one, Satoru will stop the wind, on two, three, four, he'll change the wind direction and create a mirror. On five, six, seven, I'll attack. And we'll run at eight…"

"Got it."

"I understand."

I took a deep breath.

Everything would be decided within the next minute. The thought made my legs go weak. Having survived for this long already, I thought that I would be braver in this moment, but I was still terrified.

I might die.

There were still so many things I wanted to do. I couldn't stand the thought of disappearing, my body rotting beneath the earth.

No, that wasn't what I was truly afraid of.

I was scared that I would die in vain. That I wouldn't be able to stop the fiend, and end up dying for nothing. That on the verge of death, I would hear the trumpets heralding Yakomaru's victory and be unable to do anything except apologize to the rest of humanity for my failure.

I felt lightheaded and my mouth was dry with nervousness.

Calm down.

Concentrate on what you have to do.

I tried desperately to calm myself.

"Okay, ready? Ten, nine, eight, seven…"

My heart began to beat furiously as I counted, and my body tensed to prepare itself for the fight.

"Three, two, one, zero."

The wind weakened suddenly. Satoru had created a wall on the far left of the tunnel, blocking the wind. Then he made sealed vacuum in front of the wall

"One."

A mirror began to form in the air.

"Two, three, four."

Satoru released the seal on the vacuum slightly. The negative pressure sucked air into it, reversing the wind. The wind was too weak for me to feel, but I could see tiny dust motes starting to move in the other direction. The mirror was also slowly rotating to show the soldiers on our right.

I picked out one of the soldiers. Its death needed to be as flashy as possible; I couldn't just snap its neck silently. I chanted my mantra under my breath.

"Five."

The soldier's head exploded in a spray of blood.

"Six."

The rest of the soldiers began firing the guns wildly in terror. They couldn't seem to hear Yakomaru ordering them to stop. Once the arquebuses were fired, they needed time to reload.

"Seven."

The firing stopped. I chose two queerats and smashed them into the ceiling. Rocks, blood, and flesh rained down on them. Three soldiers remained. One turned and ran, and the others followed.

"Eight!"

Kiroumaru flew out of the tunnel with me right behind.

He looked a bit awkward, but being such a large queerat, it was difficult to distinguish him from a human as he ran on his hind legs through the dark tunnel. Squinting over Kiroumaru's shoulder, I spotted a small figure standing ahead. It had blood-red hair. The child. He was glaring at us with open hatred.

Kiroumaru's human imitation was amazing. It could have beat out Inui's performance at pretending to be a queerat. As he ran, he pretended to use cantus, muttering and gesturing at the retreating soldiers.

Immediately, I slashed the head off one of the soldiers. The stink of blood in the narrow tunnel was beginning to make it hard to breathe.

"ギ★＊∀§▲Ж…AД ヲヹ!"

The fiend…the child's howl was more animal than human.

Kiroumaru suddenly stopped as if he had hit a wall.

The hole that suddenly appeared in his body was so large that I could see right through it. Blood drenched me from head to foot as Kiroumaru's guts flew through the air and landed with a loud splat.

"ギ★＊∀§…"

The child seemed to realize something was wrong, and stopped his incantation, staring hard at Kiroumaru.

A human would have died instantly. But Kiroumaru was still standing. There was still one thing he had to do. With a shaking hand, he reached up and began unwinding the bandages around his head.

The tunnel went dead silent.

As the last of the bandages dropped away and revealed him to be a queerat, the child stood frozen on the spot.

"ΠΥ ガ…▼Ë…⊿…"

Kiroumaru spat out these last words and crumpled to the ground. I ran toward him, although it was clear that he was already dead. A satisfied smile lingered on his face.

There was a bone-chilling scream and I looked up.

"ΠΥ ガ Ш▼Ë…◎⊿…?"

The fiend…the child looked dumbfounded. Then he started trembling and beads of sweat broke out on his forehead.

I wanted to turn away, but bit my lip and forced myself to look.

Maria and Mamoru's son fell to his knees, clutching at the left side of his chest.

Death feedback had activated the moment he realized he had killed one of his own kind.

I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood.

He couldn't escape. This child is going to…

A sharp pain tore through my chest, and a chill ran up my entire body, making all my hairs stand on end.

It was like a bolt of thunder on a clear day. Was I going to be punished as well?

I didn't think that my own death feedback would be activated, but as long as I intended to kill another human, it was still a possibility.

Satoru ran forward. "Saki, what's wrong?"

I felt sick. The moment I truly realized the child was going to die, my chest had started hurting. Desperately, I kept thinking to myself, I'm not killing him. I'm not killing him, I'm not killing him…

Suddenly, I wondered why I wanted so badly to stay alive. Everyone I loved had been dying one by one; why would I want to live with that kind of burden?

The pain disappeared. Was I still alive? I looked up to see Satoru smiling at me.

"Don't worry. …everything's alright now."

He hugged me so hard it hurt.

I had caused the child's death, but hadn't attacked him directly. That's why death feedback hadn't fully activated; the pain I felt was just a warning.

Once again, I looked at the child. He lay absolutely still. It was over.

Yakomaru stood stupefied to one side.

The color of the child's hair caught my eye. It was the exact same shade as Maria's.

The only proof that she had ever lived…I hadn't wanted to kill him. But there was no other way.

Tears began to roll down my face.

If he had been born in the town, I had no doubt he would have been a lovable, intelligent boy.

The child was innocent…

Even now, I sometimes feel guilty about what I've done. And even I know it would never come true, I still can't help wishing. At the very least, I wish he had died as a human.

The war was quickly coming to an end.

After losing his trump card, Yakomaru must have seen the inevitable conclusion of the battle. All the fight went out of him and we captured him and his troops, seized his ships, and returned to town.

Many people had made up their minds to flee the town and were in the process of setting off. However, once we announced that the "fiend" was dead, everything changed.

Tomiko, along with many of the members of the Ethics Committee, were dead. A temporary executive decision-making organization called the Law and Order Restoration Committee was formed to launch a massive counterattack against the queerats.

And despite our youth, Satoru and I were selected to be members of the committee.

Most people who had held leadership positions in the district were dead, so they didn't have the luxury of choosing members based on seniority. Most were twenty or thirty year-olds who had distinguished themselves in the battles against the queerats.

My parents were among those who had died. Satoru lost his entire family.

I broke down crying when I found out. I thought I had run out of tears, but ended up crying for days on end.

Later, I heard from the people who had seen my parents last. They had returned to the district just as the war reached a critical phase.

By Yakomaru's command, Shisei Kaburagi's corpse was hung on the Holy Barrier. Those who saw it were seized with an overwhelming fear. They lost the will to fight and ran in helpless panic. Thanks to the "fiend", the queerats easily hunted down and captured nearly a hundred people.

At that stage, Yakomaru started taking hostages instead of simply killing everyone. They were blindfolded to prevent them from using cantus and put into pens.

Those who had not yet given up the fight continued to attack the queerats, carefully avoiding the fiend, and managed to wear down some of the enemy forces.

My parents arrived during the middle of this and went around to the schools to release the impure cats.

Apparently the impure cats are far more intelligent than I had assumed. Tracking people from their scent was easy, but they could also remember faces from drawings and correctly identify their targets weeks later.

My parents released all twelve cats, who hid in the ruins of the town and waited for an opportunity to kill the "fiend". They managed to succeed on one point.

According to people who were watching from the rooftops, the impure cats launched what looked like a coordinated maneuver upon discovering the "fiend".

The "fiend" and his guard were traveling south when a brown cat came in from the west and a grey cat came in from the east. The brown cat was upwind, so when the queerats caught its scent, they began to shift their defenses to the west. This opened a gap for the grey cat to rush into.

Then the third and fourth cats appeared out of nowhere and pounced from the north. One of the cats, a calico, circled around to come in from the south to surround the "fiend" on three sides. It looked like the cats would win, since no matter how talented or powerful the "fiend" was, it seemed unlikely he could fight three impure cats at once.

But the guards managed to avoid the attack just in time. The guards were mutants with sharp quills all over their backs that proved tricky even for the cats. In the time that it took for the cats to knock the guards off their feet and cut open their soft bellies, the "fiend" had more than enough time to kill all three cats.

In the end, the impure cats were unable to take down the "fiend", but they were able to slow him down, which allowed more townspeople to escape.

As the impure cats tried to stop the "fiend", my parents went to the library and destroyed all the books that might prove dangerous in enemy hands. But the smoke from the fires attracted the enemy's attention, and when my parents left the library, they ran into the "fiend" outside…

Like all the others who had sacrificed themselves, I believe my parents did not die in vain. But it gradually became clear who had the upper hand. Our chances of defeating the "fiend" were close to none.

But all of a sudden, the "fiend" began acting strangely, as if distracted. Thanks to that, a good deal of lives were saved, but it was unclear what was causing the change. Perhaps the prayers to exorcise the "fiend" were taking effect.

Yakomaru tortured this information out of the captives and quickly led his elite troops to deal with the situation. A number of his troops left the town and went to burn down the Temple of Purity. Head Priest Mushin, Gyousha, and almost all the monks met the same fate. There was no one left to stop the fiend.

Then Yakomaru came after us, presumably using information he had obtained at the temple.

Let's return to the present. News of the "fiend's" death spread like wildfire, burning away the fear in everyone's hearts, and replacing it with a rage and monstrous desire for revenge.

Around that time, reinforcements from Tainai 84 in Hokuriku and Koumi 95 in Chuubu arrived.

The tide of the battle turned.

The queerats lost both their brawn, the "fiend", and their brains, Yakomaru, in one fell swoop. All the other mutants they could have used, like the powder-blowing monster, were gone as well. They had nowhere to run and the Wildlife Protection squad from the other districts quickly surrounded and dispatched them.

Yakomaru's second in command, Squeaker, returned all the stolen infants and sent a messenger to negotiate a truce. But the committee sent the messenger back mounted and stuffed with a polite

letter of refusal in its mouth. He sent another messenger with a letter of surrender in return for the lives of his soldiers, and this time the committee sent back the messenger in the form of a mutant clump of cancerous cells.

Seeing that there was no way out of the situation, Squeaker led the rest of his troops into battle on a suicide mission.

But the people, still raring for revenge, weren't about to let the queerats die so easily, and took their time slowly torturing every soldier to death.

Satoru and I also participated in annihilating the queerats, but it's not something I want to talk about in detail.

There are two things I will never forget. The first is the sight of a field dyed completely red and full of the stink of blood. The second is the shrieks of a thousand queerats, which to me sounded just like human screams.

Seeing Yakomaru a week later, he looked shrunken, as if his very spirit had been drained.

He sat chained on the stone floor and looked up at us.

"Yakomaru, do you remember us?"

There was only a vague response.

"I'm Saki Watanabe from the Exospecies Division of the Department of Health. This is Satoru Asahina from Lotus Farms."

"…I remember," came the hoarse reply after a pause. "You're the ones who killed our messiah and captured me in the tunnels under Tokyo."

"What are you talking about? We didn't kill him!" Satoru snapped. "You devised that wretched plan to kill Maria and Mamoru, didn't you? Then their orphaned child killed hundreds of people because of you! All of that is on you."

Yakomaru didn't reply.

"You'll be put on trial soon. Before that, there's something I want to ask you," I said quietly.

Ordinarily, letting an exospecies stand trial was unheard of, but the committee decided to hold a special hearing. They consulted records of animal trials in Europe a thousand or so years ago to establish the first trial in which a non-human was the accused. But Yakomaru might not be given much opportunity to speak, and even if he was, I wondered if he would tell the truth.

"Why did you do all that?"

"All that…?" Yakomaru smiled faintly.

"There are more charges against you than you can count. I want to know why you ruthlessly murdered all those people."

Yakomaru had to twist his head in an awkward position to look up at me.

"It was simply part of the strategy. Once hostilities commenced, we had to do everything we could to win. If we lost…well, I would be in the exact position that I am now."

"Why did you revolt against mankind, then?"

"Because we are not your slaves."

"What do you mean? Granted, we did ask you to pay tribute and to work for us, but we've always acknowledged your complete autonomy, haven't we?" Satoru said sharply.

"Only when you are in good humor, my masters. However, should we invoke your wrath for the tiniest of reasons, our colony would be instantly eradicated. Perhaps we are even less than slaves."

I remembered Kiroumaru had said basically the same thing.

"The elimination of a colony is the highest penalty. It's reserved for only the worst offenses. If you hadn't killed human beings, or revolted against us…"

I thought back on the past punishments the Exospecies Division had dealt out.

"Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Either way, our lives are as uncertain as bubbles on the surface of a pond. Is it not natural to wish to escape that fate?" Yakomaru said, baring his teeth with his head held high. "We are highly intelligent beings. We are not inferior to you in any way. The only difference is you possess the wicked power called cantus, and we do not."

"What you just said was more than enough to earn you the death penalty," Satoru said, looking coldly down at Yakomaru.

"My fate would not change either way." Yakomaru shrugged.

"You say you acted for the good of the colony, but Kiroumaru thought otherwise. Even if you wanted to unite the colonies, how do you justify dethroning the queen and the way you treated them like animals afterward?"

"Kiroumaru is a formidable general, but he is a relic who clung to the old ways of thinking and could not see the nature of the problem. As long as the queens hold power, reform is impossible. I did not try start a revolution for the sake of my own colony."

"Then why? Was it to satiate your lust for power?"

"It was for more than just the collection of individuals we call a colony. It was for the sake of my kind."

"Your kind? That's rich. You sent your soldiers to die and didn't even bat an eyelid."

"Like I said before, it was all part of the strategy. It's pointless unless we win. Once we won, all the sacrifices would have been worth it."

Satoru clicked his tongue. "You talk big. But unfortunately, you lost. You said it's meaningless unless you win, but you still lost."

"Yes, that is why I deserve to die a hundred times over. I held the all-powerful trump card, the messiah, but succumbed to a simple trick and lost everything." Yakomaru's head dropped. "We could have changed history… we could have achieved the greatest dream, freedom for our kind. An opportunity like this may never come again."

"Let's go, Saki. It's a waste of time to talk any further."

"Wait." I held Satoru back.

"Yakomaru–"

"My name is Squealer."

"Squealer, then. There's something I want to ask of you. I want you to apologize from the bottom of your heart to all the people you killed."

"Absolutely," Yakomaru…Squealer said sarcastically. "Only if you apologize first. Apologize to all of my kind that you crushed mercilessly like worms beneath your feet."

The trial was, in a word, farcical.

As Yakomaru's crimes were listed one by one, the audience (basically everyone in the district who wasn't sick or injured) raised their voice angrily.

When the prosecutor, Kimoto (who used to be Tomiko's assistant), saw that the audience was sufficiently agitated, she turned to face Yakomaru who was chained to the defendant's seat.

"Now then, Yakomaru. This is your chance to explain yourself."

"My name is Squealer!" he shouted.

The audience booed loudly.

"You insolently reject the name graciously bestowed upon you by the towns, beast?"

"We are not beasts or slaves!"

The crowd's anger was at its peak. The leaked cantus was so high that the courtroom was filled with a headache-inducing tension. Even though he knew that death was inevitable, Yakomaru was prepared and didn't falter at all.

"If you aren't beasts, then what are you?"

Squealer looked slowly around the court. My heart skipped a beat as we made eye contact for a split second.

"We are humans!"

The audience went silent. Then exploded in laughter. As the laughter continued, even Kimoto couldn't hide her smile. As the crowd finally settled down, Squealer spoke before Kimoto could open her mouth.

"Laugh all you want. No evil goes unpunished forever! Even if I die, one day someone else will carry on my cause. And that day shall be the end of your tyranny!"

The court dissolved into chaos. Many called for Squealer to be torn limb from limb, shouting until the veins stood out on their foreheads.

"Wait. Everyone, wait…" Kimoto struggled to make herself heard over the crowd. "Listen! Listen! Simply killing him would be too kind, don't you think? Think about all the evil deeds he's done. We'd only be granting him peace. I propose the sentence of eternal hell on this vermin!"

The crowd roared with approval.

I quietly slipped out of the courtroom with Satoru close behind.

"What's wrong? Don't you think he got what he deserved?"

"You think so?"

"What are you saying? Your parents, my family, and countless people in the district were all killed because of him."

"Yes, but is there a point to such cruel revenge? Just kill him and be done with it."

"They won't be able to accept that. Listen to them."

Their frenzied shouts of the audience was probably audible for miles. The shouts soon became a steady chant of "Eternal!" and "Hell!"

"I don't know what's right anymore…" I whispered.

After half a day of proceedings, Squealer was sentenced to eternal hell. That involved sending signals of extreme pain from every nerve cell in his body, while constantly regenerating all the

damage sustained using cantus, denying him the salvation of death or insanity. It was the ultimate punishment.

In that state, Squealer could still live for a hundred years.

Tomiko's words suddenly came back to me. I vow to subject him to agony no living being has suffered before as he dies a slow, protracted death.

Those words had become reality.

And all that was left in my heart was an endless void.

6

I walked back and forth gathering vegetable and plant scraps and tossing them in a bowl. It wasn't enough food for the voracious naked mole rats, but food was scarce even for humans nowadays, so there was nothing I could do.

I walked through the Department of Health, which still bore the damage from before, and entered the wrecked nursery. The roof of the building was entirely gone, exposing everything to the elements, but at least most of the walls were intact. Part of the network of glass tubes that had been their nest were broken, making them too dangerous to use, so the 35 naked mole rats were now living underground like they would in the wild. The walls extended deep underground so there was no risk of them escaping.

I dumped the scraps into the feeding area. The worker rats, sensing the vibration, began to emerge The last to come was the queen, Salami, and her male mates. The worker rats scattered in the presence of her giant, sausage-shaped body as she staked her claim to the food.

When I found out that these mole rats had survived despite the destruction, I felt a strange sense of disappointment. Of course, the mole rats were innocent. We couldn't kill them, and letting them go might harm the environment. So we decided to keep taking care of them.

Still, they were depressing creatures. They were ugly, incestuous, and coprophagic. It was hard to develop any sort of sympathy for them. Even before all this, I had wondered why we had taken such an ugly creature and modified it with cantus into something with an intelligence equal to humans.

After feeding them, I went back to the Department of Health. Although the building was badly damaged, it hadn't been burned, so most of the books were still intact. I'd have to pick out the more important ones to be moved into a new building in the next few days.

Under the new council, the Exospecies Division no longer operated under the Department of Health but reported directly to the Ethics Committee. I was slated to be a member of the Ethics Committee as well as the first head of the Exospecies Division. My first job was to convince the Ethics Committee to revoke its decision to exterminate all the queerats in Kanto. No matter how you looked at it, it was pointless to punish all the loyal colonies along with the treasonous ones. And at the very least, I needed to keep the promise I made to Kiroumaru that I would save his queen.

It wasn't easy sorting through 50 boxes of documents, but I had resolved to tackle it on my own. As I dug through the Exospecies Division's library, I flipped through many papers I had never had the chance to read before, and with them came a wave of questions.

Some of these documents would probably be forbidden to those who didn't work in the division. Something in the back of my mind seemed to be aware of that.

Today too, I became absorbed in the books I brought out to check. I still had a mountain of documents left to sort through, but I just couldn't resist looking through each one.

But there were other things I had to get done today, so I didn't have the time to sit around reading.

"Saki." Satoru wandered into the room through the broken door.

"Hey, I found more weird documents. Want to hear about them?"

Satoru looked like he had something to say, but simply answered, "Sure."

"It looks like it was translated from English, and has to do with the scientific name for queerats. Their ancestors, the naked mole rats, were called *Heterocephalus glaber*. *Heterocephalus* is Greek for 'strange head', and *glaber* means 'bald'…"

"Okay, and?" Satoru raised an eyebrow.

"Humans are called *Homo sapiens*, right? Don't *homo* and *hetero* have opposite meanings?"

"Isn't that just a coincidence? Both names were given by the ancient civilization."

"Yeah, but this document proposes a different name that sounds like a combination of the two, *Homocephalus glaber*. Isn't that strange?"

I thought he would scoff at me, but Satoru had surprisingly serious look on his face.

"…did they use that name in the end?"

"I don't know. I'd have to look at library documents. And here's the document that proposes the scientific name for queerats. The date is too faded to read, but the paper looks at least a couple hundred years old."

"It must be from around the same time the queerats appeared."

Satoru looked around at the rubble all over the room, found an undamaged chair, and sat down.

"It cites an ancient kanji dictionary concerning the etymology of the character for 'queer'. 'By combining the symbol for 'man' with an inverted 'man', it expresses a person changing form or simply, 'change'… I checked one of our kanji dictionaries, but the entry is gone. It was classified under 'sinister'."

He stood up again and paced back and forth across the room.

"Satoru…what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I didn't want to tell you, but-"

"What?"

"I looked into their genes. The queerats'."

I stood up too.

"What about it?"

"I couldn't stop thinking about it. What Yakomaru…Squealer said at the trial."

"…me either."

In response to Kimoto's question, "If you aren't beasts, then what are you," Squealer had answered, "We are humans!" Those words were stuck in my head. Didn't he hate the entire human race? Why did he call himself "human"?

"I secretly froze part of the corpse of a queerat near the farm. You might not know, but the Code of Ethics forbids the study and analysis of queerat DNA. Though I didn't know why until now."

"And what about it?" I asked with bated breath.

"I didn't even have to sequence the DNA to find out. Queerats have 23 pairs of chromosomes, including sex chromosomes," Satoru said, shaking his head slightly.

"And? I don't understand what this means, explain it to me."

"Naked mole rats, their supposed ancestors, have 30 pairs of chromosomes. It means they're fundamentally different organisms."

"In other words…queerats are originally unrelated to the naked mole rats we're raising?"

"Not quite. I think the only possible explanation is that the queerats' physical characteristics come from mole rat genes inserted into their genome. But the base organism is something else."

"No way…"

"Humans have 23 pairs of chromosomes too. The only other species with the same number, that I know of, is the olive tree. But would you believe that queerats were created from trees?"

When did I start suspecting that queerats might be human?

I suddenly remembered a question Shun had asked the false minoshiro we captured during summer camp.

"The commoners of the slave empires and the hunter-gatherers didn't have cantus…PK, right? Where did they go?"

"There are few reliable sources from the past few centuries. Unfortunately, I cannot answer your question," the false minoshiro said evasively.

A chill went up my spine. Did our ancestors with cantus turn those who did not have the power into queerats?

"But why? Why would they do that?"

"Their objective is easy to see," Satoru said gloomily. "People who acquired cantus have made history bloodier than ever. When peace finally came, they reprogrammed their genes to include death feedback and attack inhibition to disable the ability to attack humans. But once they did that, those without cantus became a problem."

"How come?"

"Up until then, those who had cantus were of the highest class. The so-called power elites ruled over non-cantus users and did all they could to stay in power. But with attack inhibition and death feedback, their positions would be reversed. Cantus users could not attack those who didn't use cantus, but the opposite did not apply. Their relationship was like that of the fiend…Maria's child and the queerats."

"Couldn't they have just given attack inhibition and death feedback to non-cantus people?"

"There are two reasons they didn't. First, cantus-users did not want to give up their absolute power over all those who could not use the power. Second, leaving aside attack inhibition, it isn't possible to build the mechanisms into non-cantus people. Remember how death feedback works? First you have to realize that you're attacking another human. Once that happens, their PK subconsciously activates and causes a massive secretion of hormones that eventually stops the heart."

In other words, death feedback was forced suicide by cantus. So those without cantus could not have death feedback.

"So you mean they changed the people who were in the way…they changed those without cantus into beasts?"

I shuddered as I realized that the society I had lived in was so steeped in sin.

"Yeah. Just having a caste system wasn't enough. They inserted enough naked mole rat genes into non-cantus peoples' DNA until they could no longer trigger attack inhibition or death feedback. …they were turned into slaves and forced to pay tribute to those with power, all to maintain the position of the privileged class."

Then "humans" with cantus turned their fellow humans into beasts and continued to kill them without mercy.

"But why did they turn them into such ugly creatures, of all things?"

"Probably for that very reason. Their ugliness."

Satoru's answer brought no comfort.

"Their ugliness helped us to think of them as an apparently different species and suppressed any feelings of empathy we might have, so that we could kill them. …of course, another reason might be that the mole rats' eusociality, which is uncommon among mammals, makes them easier to control."

I wondered why I didn't realize this earlier. It made perfect sense if I thought about it. Queerats are physically hundreds of times larger than naked mole rats. Even with cantus speeding up evolution, for them to grow this large in such a short period of time was inconceivable.

It might be easier to understand using dogs as an analogy. Although they've split into many different breeds, once you see their teeth it's easy to tell they're the same species. The same teeth are stuffed into the jaw of a small dog like a chihuahua and spread out in a large dog like a Saint Bernard.

The queerats didn't have such an obviously distinguishing characteristic.

No, it was probably something even more fundamental.

Why did the queen have the ability to change her offspring's form? Was the ability to control fetal development a limited form of cantus? Since it was cantus that transformed them into beasts, it wouldn't be too surprising that it would leave a residual power.

"We've been killing them like it was nothing. Of course, we didn't do it without reason, but all the same, we did kill them."

Once again, I was shocked by Satoru's words.

"In that case, we should've died from death feedback… We did kill humans after all, even if they didn't look like it."

Just thinking about that made my heart speed up and cold sweat break out all over my body.

"No, they're not human. They might have come from the same ancestors as us, but now they're a completely different species."

"But you said they also have 23 chromosomes…"

Even chimpanzees had a different number of chromosomes from humans.

"That's not everything. We also need to mentally recognize queerats as the same species. The leaf fighters in the Ground Spider colony, blowdogs, that powder monster…do you really consider them our kind?"

Satoru's question echoed in my ears for a long time.

I'll be honest. Despite the reasoning behind it, I didn't think of queerats or their mutant offspring as humans.

It's also true that I tried not to think of them that way.

My hands were stained with blood. Most of it was in self-defense–unavoidable things I had to do to save myself or those around me. But it was also true that, in our war against them, I had killed hundreds of thousands of them. Now, they call it homicide, so I don't know what I should do. Death feedback hadn't been activated at the time, but I couldn't help but worry that it would be triggered if I kept thinking about it.

And one more thing. I could never think of them that way because of what I had to do today.

There was a new park in the middle of Hayring. It was a memorial park dedicated to all those who had been killed in the queerat attack.

In the park was a flowerbed with a monument placed in the center to honor the souls of the deceased. It was only a month after the war, and many buildings were still in ruins, but the park was one of the first things to be built.

So that we would not forget the horrors of war, there was a memorial hall in the farthest corner of the park.

When the hall was first completed, there were long lines of people outside every day. Lines where people could renew their hatred and fuel their desire for vengeance every day. Among those who came each day was an old man who had lost his sons and daughters, and their wives and husbands, and grandchildren–basically his entire family–to the queerats.

I was inside the war memorial hall. There were no visitors. Everyone was at the memorial service being held in Outlook.

On the walls were displays depicting the atrocities committed by the queerats. The weapons they used, the soldiers and the cowardly tactics they used to kill innocent people. The peculiarities of their anatomy were grossly exaggerated, but all were made with genuine, stuffed specimen.

Next to the displays of the regular soldiers was a model of a false human. From a distance, it looked natural, but up close it was very uncanny .

Across from it was the head of one of the powder-spewing monsters that had stayed miraculously intact, along with a 1:10 scaled model of its entire body. The text explained the science behind the power of dust explosions.

And at the very end of the hall was a large glass case.

An attendant sat in front of the glass case. The display was watched 24 hours a day in 6 hour shifts. Today, a middle-aged man called Onose was on duty.

"Oh, Watanabe-san. Shouldn't you be at today's memorial service?" he asked, sounding surprised.

"I just came from there. What about you?"

"Of course, I wanted to go, but someone has to stay here…" he gave the thing in the glass case a look of utter disgust.

"Why don't you go then? I'll watch over this place."

"Oh no, I couldn't. A member of the Ethics Committee shouldn't be doing work like this…" Onose said, but couldn't hide his desire to leave.

"It's alright. If you go now, you can still make it in time for the flower offering. Give a flower to the daughter you lost."

"Well…alright, if you don't mind. I'll take you up on the offer."

A joyful look came over Onose's face, but he still glared at the glass case as he left.

"It's all this thing's fault. This ugly, rotten, evil…please make it suffer as much as humanly possible."

"Yes. I lost my parents and many of my friends as well… You should probably hurry to the ceremony."

"Right, sorry. I'll be off." Onose hurried out of the memorial hall.

I waited for a moment to make sure he wasn't coming back, then slowly approached the case.

Upon looking through the fortified glass, I couldn't help but avert my eyes. But I had to look. I took a deep breath, counted to ten, and looked again.

What lay inside was no longer a living thing but a lump of flesh that existed solely to suffer.

"Squealer…" I called softly.

Of course, there was no answer.

"I should have come earlier, but didn't have a chance before today. I had to wait until there was no one around."

In order to inflict continual pain and suffering, a special tumor cells were introduced into Squealer's nervous system. When I intercepted the pain signals, his convulsions stopped. It was probably the first time this month he had felt reprieve.

"You've suffered enough. …so let this be the end."

It would've been better if Satoru hadn't told me those things. A new wave of regret washed over me. Would I really be able to do it? Knowing that the thing lying here was descended from humans.

The phrase "doing the devil's deed with an angel's heart" came to mind.

I closed my eyes and calmly chanted my mantra again. Usually I would quickly call the words to mind, but this time I mouthed them slowly.

I numbed Squealer's respiratory center.

"Hey Squealer, do you remember the first time we met?" I said affectionately.

My voice probably wouldn't carry through the glass, but I suspected he would understand anyway.

"We had been captured by the Ground Spiders, but managed to escape. Then we ran into more queerats and thought that we were done for. But it was the Robber Fly colony that you were part of. You were our savior."

Of course, there was no reply from the lump of flesh in the glass case. But somehow I felt like he was listening to me.

"You were wearing this wonderful armor and spoke very fluently. You have no idea how relieved we were to hear you speak."

There was a faint sighing sound. It was probably just a natural physical response to having his breathing stopped, but it sounded like a reply from Squealer.

"And from there all sorts of things happened. Like running from Kiroumaru through the night. But you sold us out and were reporting to him all along, weren't you? Really, you were always a liar…"

I stopped suddenly, realizing that Squealer was dead.

I checked on him and told myself that this was for the best.

That month must have felt like an eternity. But the pain was over now.

I burned Squealer's corpse to ashes to prevent him from being resuscitated, and left the memorial hall.

I did it in a fit of hateful fury. That was the excuse I had prepared for when I was questioned. That way, I could avoid serious punishment. Isn't it outrageous that a member of the Ethics Committee could flaunt the rules like that? But by then, I had realized that there are things more important than rules.

As I exited the park, I heard a melody carried faintly on the wind. The rebuilt town hall was playing "Going Home".

The sun sets over the distant mountains
Stars stud the sky
Today's work is finished
My heart feels light
In the cool evening breeze
Come, gather around
Gather around

The bonfire burning brightly in the darkness
Now dies down
Sleep comes easily
Inviting me to disappear
Gently watching over us
Come, let us dream
Let us dream

"Why?" I whispered to myself. Why couldn't I stop my tears from falling?

This chronicle is finally nearing the end.

I just want to briefly touch on what happened between then and now.

For putting Squealer out of his misery, I was suspended for a month. No one really blamed me for what I did. Maybe it was because I was highly regarded for bringing the war to an end, or that most people had tired of the existence of the queerat sentenced to eternal suffering because their initial

hatred had faded and the sight of a living being in constant pain was making them uneasy. And somehow people got the idea that taking part in inflicting such suffering would bring a curse upon them.

The proposal to exterminate all queerats around the district was fiercely debated, and narrowly defeated in the end. In recognition for being consistently loyal, the Giant Hornets and five colonies under it were spared, so I somehow managed to keep my promise to Kiroumaru.

On the other hand, all the other colonies were eradicated and I was the only person to oppose it.

Two years after that, Satoru and I married.

Three years after that, I was elected to become the youngest head of the Ethics Committee, and have held the post to this day.

Ten years have passed since that day when things returned to dust.

A span of ten years doesn't mean much in the grand scheme of things. But like I wrote at the beginning, although many problems were being solved, and the new order was well on its way to being established, doubts about the future began to sprout.

The most pressing of these issues was a comprehensive report on fiends and karma demons. According to the report, at this moment, the chances of fiends and karma demons appearing was higher than ever in history.

Until now, the birth of fiends and karma demons was seen as a spontaneous mutation. But according to the report, their appearance was clearly linked to the state of a society like that of ours ten years ago.

The theory, which at the moment is still mere conjecture, is that when many people in a society are subjected to high tension and other emotional disturbances, cantus leakage causes genetic mutation, creating a high chance of giving birth to children who have incomplete attack inhibition or death feedback.

On top of that, the report states that when the children are raised by emotionally unstable parents, the probability of them turning into karma demons skyrockets.

If that was really the mechanism for creating fiends and karma demons, then it made sense to worry because now was a more dangerous time than ever before. Ten years ago, our district was struck by an unprecedented tragedy. There were scenes of gruesome deaths that even now left many citizens traumatized. And in addition, the trauma caused by the war against the queerats, everyone felt at least a fleeting moment of hatred and desire for violence.

The children who were born soon after are nearing the age when they will awaken their cantus. If there was one among them who had Raman-Klogius or Hashimoto-Appelbaum syndrome, then our district was in real danger of complete destruction.

The Ethics Committee had to make a bitter decision. The first ten years, they reinstated the Impure Cat breeding program. The plan was carried out in absolute secrecy at the Lotus Farms, headed by Satoru. I was only recently allowed to see the 22 cute kittens. At the moment, they looked just like normal cats, but soon they would grow into fierce, saber-toothed beasts. All we could do was pray that these kittens would never have to perform the job they were bred to do.

This wasn't the new Ethics Committee's only job.

Until now, the nine districts in the Japanese archipelago had only the barest contact with each other, and I proposed to change that as the first item of our reform.

The war against the queerats a decade ago gave us the ideal opportunity to do just that. In any case, I established a conference between us and Tainai 84 in Hokuriku, Koumi 95 in Chuubu, and Shiroishi 71 in Tohoku regarding the construction of future districts.

Then, once the conference was established, we began preparing to expand our network to include Yuubari Shinsei from Hokkaido, Seika 59 from Kansai, Iwami Ginzan from Chugoku, Shimanto from Shikoku, and Saikai 77 from Kyushu, towns that still had some contact with those already in the conference.

And that wasn't all. Once we established contact with Saikai 77, we sent a message to the Kaya district in south of the Korean peninsula (the translation was provided by a newly captured false minoshiro). This was probably the first revival of international communications in centuries.

But there was still one thing that absolutely needed to be done.

I was just talking to Satoru about it.

"…whether you call it timidity or conservativeness, I don't like how we take it to the extreme. I can see it in members of the Ethics Committee that are even younger than I am."

Satoru smiled. "Don't worry about it. They probably just aren't as brave as you are."

I wonder why everyone said that. I didn't think anyone was more careful than I am.

"Sometimes I wonder if cantus has really given humans any sort of benefit. Maybe it's like the people who created the crucifix to hold the psychobuster said, it's a gift from the devil."

"I don't think that." Satoru shook his head. "Cantus is a divine power that comes from the universe. Humans have finally reached this advanced stage through eons of evolution. We might have been unfit for it at the beginning, but now we've finally managed to coexist with it."

His opinion was so typical of an optimistic scientist

"Say, do you think we can really change?"

"We'll change. We must. Every living being continually changes to adapt to its environment in order to survive."

The question was: should we want that change?

I have not told anyone of my own views on this because I can't imagine it would be well accepted.

So I'll only mention it here.

I admit that attack inhibition and death feedback have brought peace and order.

But they are rigid, unnatural solutions that don't solve the real problem.

Like a turtle with a crack in its shell, once your defenses are weakened, there's nothing you can do to stop the enemy from flooding in and laying waste.

From the last fiend appearance, and the disaster a decade ago, we can clearly see what kind of terrors arise when attack inhibition and death feedback fail.

At some point, we have to cut off these two fetters that bind us.

In order to do that, it might cost everything we have.

I didn't want to believe it, but I felt that if the new order wasn't sealed with a massive amount of bloodshed, it might never take hold.

"Saki, what are you thinking?" Satoru asked, a wondering expression on his face.

"It's nothing. …by the time our child has grown up, I hope our society will be much better."

"Don't worry. I'm sure it will," he said, laying a hand on my stomach.

There was new life inside of me. Our first child.

Until now, the thought of having kids sometimes scared me, but not any more. Children are hope, and no matter what happens from now on, I believe my child will be able to cope.

We agreed that we'd name the baby Shun if it was a boy, and Maria if it was a girl.

Shun hasn't appeared once since the event ten years ago. I'm suppose he's sleeping somewhere deep in the ocean of my subconscious. Even so, I'm sure he's still always watching over us.

Late at night, when things have fallen silent all around me, I sink into a chair and close my eyes.

The memory that floats to the surface is always the same.

In the darkness of the hall at the back of the temple, a flame burns above the altar. Sparks burst from the fire like orange snowflakes, as if they are chiming in with the sound of chanting coming from beneath the earth.

Each time, I wonder why it's this scene.

I've always thought it was because the hypnotic suggestion from my initiation ceremony was that powerful.

But now that I'm nearing the end of this record, I don't think that's the reason.

The flames probably symbolize something eternal, continuing without end toward the future.

Like I wrote at the beginning, I'll make two copies of the book, put them all in time capsules and bury them deep underground. I'll also have a false minoshiro scan it into its memory, to be released a millennium from now.

Will we really be able to change? When you're reading this a thousand years from now, maybe you'll have the answer.

Hopefully, the answer is 'yes'.

245, December 1 Saki Watanabe

This might be superfluous, but I want to include the quote written on the walls of Sage Academy.

The power of imagination is what changes everything.